

The people of the clouds

JP Ogden

Chapter 1

A line of people, dark cloaks and hoods blending them into the cold dawn, passed somber villagers. The procession moved down the gravel path, into the woods at the edge of the village. In the trees, the mist lurked, retreating from the rising sun. The path led to a glade occupied by the ritual Stone, its flat surface worn smooth by seasons of hands. The mist avoided the place, the Stone filled it with its angry bulk.

The procession formed a circle around the sacred altar, backing up to the edges of the glade, shadows merging with the mist. The last three in the line walked toward the hulking rock. Egmond knelt in front of it flanked by Henrik; friend, mentor, nearly an older brother; and Laya, his aunt, recently arrived from her mountain cottage. If only a different hand were on his shoulder. A different smile at his back. But then he wouldn't be kneeling here.

Laya walked around to stand in front of him, her back facing the Stone. She pressed a clay jug into his hands, still warm from the hearth. The mead within had been steeping with last year's berries for weeks, their essence bleeding into the honey-wine until it gleamed dark as garnets. Who could pay attention to that right now?

"The old compact requires willing blood," she murmured, her voice harshly audible in the muted fog. "Enough to wake what sleeps in the Stone. Enough to remind the old powers that we remember our place."

She pulled out a short blade older than memory, iron black with age and use. Her fingers wrapped around his wrist and put the blade to his arm. The cut was shallow but immediate. He did not cry out. No worse than a branch in a wood, slashing as he ran after a deer. That came with laughter though.

He held the arm above the jug. His blood dripped into the mead. He poured it over the fruits arranged on the Stone's surface, dried cloudberry, hazelnuts, the preserved offerings of last autumn's bounty. No meat. You couldn't thank the Older Ones for that. Respect them, but don't give them meat.

The fog filled with the wishes and prayers of others in the circle. His parent's names whispered on quiet breaths. He spoke his own prayers. They couldn't be answered.

He drained the last of the blood and wine down his throat, the sweetness and tang mixing. He put down the cup, and watched his arm still dripping, leaking his life onto the offering.

Voices hushed, bodies waited. A numbness whispered through him. He rose to his feet to say the words. His father had said these words. His mother before him, the words held the weight of her ancestors back to the time before tales began. These words made him the Leader of Clan Heilingsson.

“I will give of myself. I will grow and rise. I will break open the paths to safety. My blood belongs to my people. Before the Older Ones I make this oath.”

The people murmured their assent.

He was 17.

The wind down the mountains already brought the bite of winter. At the treeline, the sharpness faded some; just enough to hang on to autumn. In the trees, the wind found flocks and scattered houses, set there, specifically to not be found by this wind. Wind that slipped under hoods, down backs, whipping cloaks into a frenzy; the kind that went where it wasn't wanted.

As the trees thickened, so did the houses and people. Crowds filled forest paths, overflowing into roadways, jostling and flowing, their laughter fighting back the stinging wind as it swirled in the same direction they were going.

Like the crowds, this particular wind had a destination in mind. Elderglen, the mountain village, home of clan Heilingsson, its roads and paths flooded with people, a delta at the end of a river.

The wind flew into the village, through trees, past houses, tickling the thatch, gusts knocking over stalls; it flew straight at the largest house in the village into a second floor window and slapped Egmund in the face with his own scroll.

He flapped it away and groaned, leaning back in the rickety chair, nearly falling as it wobbled. He ran his fingers over his father's delicate golden-wood trimmed desk, tracing lines he'd known since childhood.

No. His desk now.

He could change the chair.

He wouldn't.

The morning light spilled across scattered scrolls and wooden tablets on the desk and floor. His aunt would have words for him about the mess. The noise outside pulled at him. He didn't want to pay attention to it though. Didn't want to be pulled away from this place of memories. But it was the first day of the festival. He should be seen.

He got up, as hurriedly as he could without damaging the chair, and went to the window. The crisp blue sky was a sharp line against the variety of colors in the trees. Reds and yellows and oranges, browns and greens, intermixed, a distinct counter to the grey and white of the peaks. Below the window, the path was thick with people in high spirits. This day only came once a year.

Suddenly Henrik burst through the door waving a letter.

“The king sends word. The clans are to gather. The Warpact are back”, he looked grim as he held out a letter with an ornate seal, already broken.

Egmund scanned it and read out loud “‘The fishermen have reported Warpact ships in the fog in great numbers. All clans of the land are to bring all their most able warriors, hunters, and messengers to the sea within the fortnight. Come prepared for battle.’, that’s all it says.”

“This was with it”, he handed Egmund another letter. Egmund opened it.

Nephew,

Your father was a great friend to me, even before your aunt and I married. More than a friend, a brother. I need you to act in your father’s place. We require Heilingsson support. The Warpact won’t stop while we mourn. Bring your warriors to me, for the safety of us all.

- Torstin

Henrik asked with a grin: “When do we leave?”

“Does my aunt know about this?”, waving the letter.

“It came with another for her, from her sister.”

Egmund looked at the letter, then tossed it onto the desk. “I’ll have to convene a council. Tomorrow.”

Henrik nodded. “I’ll get word around”, he left immediately.

Egmund looked back at the desk. The mess would still be there later. The memories too.

He went out into the dark hall, and down the wooden stairs. The collision at the bottom sent baskets clattering across stone, skittering into corners. The kitchen’s warmth hit him. Yeast and woodsmoke and the lingering char from the morning’s bread. A sleeping hound scrambled to its feet, claws scraping against stone as it fled the chaos.

“Egmund! I’m so sorry!” Marta’s hands were a blur as she gathered up her baskets, her cheeks flushed with exertion. “It’s just that cook said yesterday that I could borrow these but then when I asked this morning she was in *quite* a temper because the roast dried out and Bjorn and Tormund stole some cakes, or at least she says they did, I wasn’t there I was out getting reeds to make some other baskets because I think this year myself and Illya are going to get so many more berries than Bjorn, he doesn’t know any good spots and we found...Nevermind! Are you ok Egmund?” she asked, already darting away. She disappeared before he answered.

Marta wasn’t the only one rushing around the house. Two more people ran out of the kitchen toward the great hall. Cook’s shouts died away as the door closed again. He hauled himself up and followed them down the hallway. Pushing through the door into the great hall, he was met by a wash of noise coming

from the main doors, swung wide framing the festival crowds outside. To his left at the head table, the seat of the Leader stared at him. Only one now, its twin put away for a time to come.

Through the doors the familiar path to the Common Green was hidden by countless feet. People darted through the crowds, their laughter mingling with the call of traders setting up stalls brimming with goods. Clan members who had traveled to be here exchanged greetings with old friends. Festival banners fluttered in the breeze, their colors vivid against the cloudless sky.

A group of children played a game on a flightpole, stabbed into the ground, a rope hooked to it's peak. A child grabbed the rope and started running, momentum carrying him outward in an arc, the pole holding the center. His friends pushed him faster as he passed them, slapping his back and chanting the rhyme.

"Once for reason, twice for a lie. Third's in season and now he'll die!"

At the last, the boy let go of the rope, flinging himself as far as he could, tumbling in the dirt while his friends marked his landing spot.

The game came out of the legend of Ohran, the Older One, the disgraced one. Who had climbed to the top of the mountain in penance, and at the end had thrown himself from the highest peak, his shattered body becoming the bushes that grew cloudberries.

It was the kind of game you only played during the festival.

The kind Egmund wouldn't play anymore.

He wandered through the festival for hours, taking it all in alone. His name was called out, his back clapped, festival foods pressed into his hand. Eventually it was time to start the race. His first official job.

As he approached the Green, the sounds of anticipation intensified. Young people jumbled around near a starting line on the road leading up the mountain. They would run into the heights—competing to bring back the biggest haul of berries—the winners splitting a giant pie and bragging rights for a year. Egmund had won a few times. He would have run this year too.

He stepped up on the small stage in the center of the Green, rising above the crowd, whose noise rumbled down to a murmur. From his vantage point he could see most of the crowd.

There was his aunt, Laya, a mirror image of his mother. There stood Marta, elbowing aside Bjorn. There stood Finnulf, the cooper, too old to win he said he ran each year for the mountain air. There stood Tormund, the youngest messenger in the clan. He would run well. And there stood Henrik. [todo: moved flashback, this is jarring now]

He forced a smile. "My people!", he yelled, louder than he'd intended. He paused as too many eyes centered on him.

He took a breath. "I'm not much of a speaker." he said to familiar faces, bringing smiles. "We stand here, another year passing." He paused, unsure what to say. "May our harvest be bountiful, and our year after

fruitful.” It was something his father said often at the cloudberry festival. It brought a chorus of cheers that he didn’t feel.

The racers were all jostling for the front in anticipation. If he didn’t hurry the elbows might turn into fists. It had happened before.

“May your feet be fleet and your baskets be full!” He caught sight of his aunt again, leaning against a building on the edge of the crowd. Smiling he said: “And may second place be forced to eat Laya’s pie!” The crowd laughed.

He raised his arms and quickly dropped them. The racers took off. Tormund ducked through the crowd and was quickly out in front. Bjorn muscled through with Marta holding the back of his shirt, using him like a plow animal and dragging Illya with them.

The cheering faded with the racer’s distance. People drifted off toward stalls and games and mead. He watched them from up on the Stone.

“I’m so tired Marta.” Illya’s shoulders slumped and her feet dragged as they jogged. “Can’t we just go off the path here and look?”

“There won’t be enough and you know it.” Even she was a little tired by now.

The start of the race had been a hoot. Bjorn cleared the crowd for them, before finally shaking her off and going off path himself. If you knew the heights, you didn’t need the paths, but you did need care.

“But I only need enough for my family, I don’t care about winning.” Illya said. She was a great friend. She would follow Marta anywhere. She usually complained about it though.

The air this high was crisp, the sun shining, warming her bones, still high in the sky.

“Let’s take a break”, she said. Sometimes Illya had to be coddled. Beside the trail was a pretty patch of grass in the scrub brush, late blooming flowers, their tiny purple and white blossoms like delicate embroidery sprinkled around the greenery, moss-covered rocks and boulders scattered around the landscape, almost as if growing out of the dirt.

Illya gratefully collapsed into the grass, falling onto her back, her closed eyes pointed to the sky. Marta sat beside her, leaning back onto her hands, drinking in the smells of flowers and snow washing down with the wind off the peaks, and the glorious earthy depths of moss. Nothing smelled as alive as moss, she loved it. A few years ago she used an old trick to take advantage of moss’s ability to grow anywhere, and made a slurry of moss and goats milk and spread it all over the side of her house. Gran had not been best pleased and to be fair, it hadn’t smelled like moss for a few months, more like sour goats. But Gran hadn’t told her to wash it off. So now their house smelled like moss year round.

The wind shifted and she caught a different familiar scent. Illya was snoring loudly so she went in search of the source alone.

A few minutes later, Illya jerked awake as a pile of cloudberry dropped into her lap. Marta tossed a few into her mouth as she sat on a boulder. Illya hastily brushed them out of her lap, "My skirt! You'll stain it!"

Oh boy. "You'll be fine," she got out her water skin and a rag, dabbing at the spots. "You could die it anyway, it makes a beautiful color if you cook it with leaves of the biscus flower. Gran showed me. But you're fine see? Got it all out. It's not as bright a color as those dyes from outside the fog but those are so expensive these days since the traders gave up getting rich off us, but I think it's really pretty; a deep, rich purple. Anyway, you're ok," she sat back.

Illya moved onto her knees. "Oh my gosh Marta! This is so much! We can go back now," she fell onto her back, arms spread wide, her smile shining.

"No! I promise you we'll get even more. These were just over there, the other side of that boulder has a shady spot and a few bushes. I can get three times this much, trust me."

"But we can't carry that much!," Illya moaned and kicked her heels against the ground.

"Illya, you're a goatherd's daughter, I can't believe you hate work so much."

"It's *why* I hate work so much," but she gathered the berries into her sack and stood up anyway. She pulled Marta to her feet and they started hiking again.

A few minutes later, a sweaty Bjorn came into the path from behind a boulder. His bag was empty on his back.

"Are you following me?" he crossed his arms and leaned against the boulder, a puffed up jay.

Marta barked a laugh. "Following you? We actually have berries." She pointed at Illya who was smiling stupidly at Bjorn and not holding up the bulging bag. Groaning, Marta grabbed the bag and brandished it at him.

He gave a big, slow nod, pursing his lips. "That's a solid haul. You should probably head back and get it recorded. It's a long way down."

"I am not done yet," she crossed her arms and set her feet solidly in the dirt.

"C'mon Marta, what are you gonna find up here? There's too much sun, not enough shade. No one has found a good haul this high in years."

"Then why are you up here with an empty sack?"

His eyes narrowed and he left the boulder. Pointing his finger at Marta he said, "I bet you already know don't you? I bet you spied on me. I bet you heard me tell Egmond. *I bet* you were trying to beat me here and steal my berries."

At that Illya gasped and stamped her foot, her glazed look burned away. "No she wouldn't!...steal from you I mean," she glanced at Marta. Illya didn't like to lie and even Marta admitted she could be nosy at

times. “Marta found her spot weeks ago and anyway, you didn’t bring rope so it can’t be the same spot.” Marta smacked her forehead. Bjorn laughed nervously and backed away up the trail. “No. You’re right. It’s a totally different spot.” He turned and dashed away uphill toward her stash. She groaned in frustration and grabbed Illya, running after him.

It wasn’t far away, he got there a few moments before them. The spot was a crevice, a split in nearly bare stone in a small depression in the ground, jagged boulders and rocks spread around the area, as if a huge boulder had rolled off the sharp point directly above, high up the mountain, and shattered here, revealing a deep crack that disappeared into darkness below.

He lowered himself over the edge and disappeared from view. The idiot was still wearing a sword and bracers, a small shield strapped to his back. A stupid boy playing at warrior since he’d been accepted months ago.

She started unpacking the length of rope as she ran. “Illya, go tie this around that rock there! The one by the cliff edge.” Illya’s knots held like locks.

Marta ran up to the edge of the crevice to see Bjorn below, toes perched on a ledge ten feet down, the rockface in front of him peppered with tiny cracks, each with a small cloudberry bush, bulging three times its normal size with ripe berries. The scene looked like a tapestry of purple bunches of people leaning out the windows of their countless cliffside homes yelling at a giant, a whole town angry at this onslaught.

Illya ran up with the rope, nearly knocking the giant buffoon in the head as she tossed it down to him. The heroine almost saving the town in one blow. But they didn’t need her.

Bjorn looked up at them, winked and popped a berry into his mouth and over balanced. His wild swipe at the wall in front of him landed. And then the sliver of stone below his toes collapsed.

Hours later, while walking around the bustling stalls, Egmond heard a disturbance near the edge of the village. Faces and hands pointed up the mountain path at a runner, rushing headlong. It was Illya, her face flushed. Her hands empty. The race was almost over, there were still stragglers out, trying to get the largest haul of berries, no one would be rushing back empty handed. He pushed through the crowd, not stopping at the edge of the village, a wave of people with him.

Illya stopped herself by barreling into Egmond. He caught her roughly, cradling her as she lowered to the ground. “What’s wrong?”

Through great gasps she said: “Bjorn...fell...help...Marta...sent me. Bjorn fell down...a ravine, Marta threw a rope to him...but then the ledge he was on...crumbled...We couldn’t pull him up. She sent me for help. She’s still holding the rope!”

“Where are they?”, Egmond asked.

“In the heights”, her shoulders sunk. “It took me ages to get back and I ran the whole way.”

“Was it near Jarran’s bluff? The old bushes hanging off the side?”

“Yes!”

“I know the place. He’s been talking about it all year.”

Finnulf was in the crowd and shouted: “Messengers! Get the messengers!”

“They’re all looking for berries.”, someone called back.

Egmund took off up the mountain, he heard other feet on the gravel keeping pace.

The rough dirt path rose steadily, the clear day broken only by the sound of scuffling boots and heavy breathing. As the ground grew steeper he distanced himself from the others. The rugged mountainside providing more treacherous footholds the higher they went. His side started aching, but he kept running. Jarran’s bluff was a good hours walk from the village.

The edges of the path dropped away. Sheer cliffs on both sides. When he looked down he could see donkeys with riders on the path down below and other runners further behind. The pack animals lumbered and bounced their riders around, sturdier than the horses outsiders had brought to their island. But not fast. Still quite far down and not gaining much ground. He kept running.

His side split. His feet hurt. His head rang with each crunching step. He kept running until he saw the bluff from down below. If he looked off to the right...there! – the ravine. He could just make out Marta’s legs gripping a large rock.

Abandoning the path he launched himself up the hillside, hand over foot, climbing more than running now. He reached the top in a burst. Marta’s voice carried to him: “You stupid greedy ignorant fool! I’m going to haul you up here if it’s the last thing I do! And then I’m going to kill you after that. And THEN I might speak to the Stone and do a blood ritual and bring you back to life so I can kill you again!”

Egmund slid to a stop next to her, going to ground and grabbing the rope below the ravine edge. There was Bjorn, desperately hanging on, his toes scrabbling at a ledge that was barely anything. His eyes opened wide and he gasped: “Oh thank Yata! Pull me up!”

Digging his feet in, Egmund strained and pulled. Bjorn was big for his age. Marta pulled her legs away from the rock, spun around and dug in her feet too. Inch by inch Bjorn crept up the cliffside. His arm slapped the top of the ravine and Egmund let go of the rope with one hand and grasped Bjorn’s arm.

A final scream of rage from Marta and Bjorn popped over the top of the ravine and they all collapsed.

Laughter bubbled up from Bjorn. He rolled over onto his back and chuckled at the sky.

Marta’s eyes were flint striking steel. “I’m going to sic Odeous *and* Soros on you if you don’t stop laughing.”

Bjorn caught her look and calmed himself. “Sorry. Thank you both. I am grateful.”

“Why are you laughing then?”

He held up a bulging sack tied to his belt. “Because I got them. OW!”

Marta picked up a second rock to throw and Egmond grabbed her arm. Laughing he said: “Only matters if you get them back in time, and you can’t ride the donkeys, that would be cheating.”

Bjorn groaned but stood up. Marta waved a stick at him: “I could chase you with a switch if you need help.” Bjorn put up his hands and backed away, a grin on his face. He turned and jogged down the trail, waving to the riders who were just coming up the bend.

Marta threw her stick after him. “Idiot.” She picked herself up and dusted her pants. “Let’s go, I need pie. I’m riding a donkey.”

Dinner was a happy affair now that everyone was safe. If Marta was kept away from Bjorn at least. Henrik basked in the glory of winning the pie. His broad back clapped so many times, he said it would ache in the morning.

They ate cloudberry pie, had roast boar, candied fruits, sour bread. Mead and cloudberry wine sloshed on tables.

Late into the night, the tables and benches were pulled against the walls. The pipes and drums came out. An exhausting day didn’t keep Egmond from dancing with abandon, driving away the world and holding to the moment.

At a certain drummed rhythm a ripple ran through the crowd. The drums took the room: two beats, a stamp, two beats again. The circle formed quickly around the bonfire in the center of the hall.

The first steps were slow. The people connected to the ground. The rhythm built, boots thumping against the floor, echoing off the walls and spilling into the rafters above. Voices joined in, a low chant, wordless at first, rising to a wild cry, pulling the beat with it. Faces flickered in the firelight, sweat glinting as the heat rose.

The dance spun on, movements repeating, urgent, wild. Voices rose, a roar, then a hush as the circle tightened. The air thick with motion and heat. The world beyond the firelight fell away. Only the blaze, bodies, and rhythm remained.

CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA
CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA

The sound crushed together. Feet, drums, pipes, voices, rolling and reeling. Egmond eyes fixed on the fire’s heart, its flicker pulsing in his chest, the air thick. The room spun gently, the noise folding flat, then swelled to the edges of his perception.

CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA
CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA

The room heaved and settled, bodies swaying, the chant closing the night in around him. Bells somewhere, voices blending, every beat pumping his heart for him. CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA

The chanting and thudding and stamping closed in. The crackle of the fire flickered in time: CHOOM-CHOOM CHA CHOOM-CHOOM CHA

The stamping, pulses shocking the ground traveling through his heart. The thudding pounding of closed fists against chests sounding out the raw rhythm. The chant, words deep, voices rumbling, echoing, connecting the stone in an avalanche of sound increasing in speed, the repetition of the stamping boots on stone, the thudding reverberating bone, the chant calling him, the stamping boom, the thudding thoom, the chant.

The stamping, the thudding, the chant. The stamping the thudding the chant the stamping the thudding the chant. All whirled into a single endless thread, pulsing. Loud, then faint, then everywhere. His thoughts slipped sideways. Sparks rose, multiplied, became nothing. Light and shadow tangled behind his eyes, shapes that never held. Everything drifted until there was only rhythm, and self.

The room reeled. His mind sank beneath. He crashed to the floor.

Chapter 2

The world throbs. Then isn't. Then his mother is there.

He is 12 and they are on the way to Thornvaal.

"I don't have to dance do I?" Egmond was not excited about 'being a noble'.

"My Life, you know you do. And you know you'll have fun."

"I like to dance but people watch me now." He shifted on his donkey and pulled at his collar.

She sidled up next to him and bumped his shoulder. "You always were special." Her smile brought a grin to his face. "Besides, we're all doing things we don't want to do right now."

"But why do we have to? Why can't we just stay home for the festival?"

His mother was quiet for a moment, looking ahead at the road. "Because sometimes staying small and hidden isn't enough anymore. The world got bigger around us, and we had to get bigger too", She trailed off.

"Or what?"

"Or we'd get swallowed up." She shook her head and smiled at him again. "But that's not going to happen. We are all deciding to work together better. That's why your aunt is marrying the King. Because we're doing what is best what is blessed what bleeds for everyone. We're doing what's best for everyone."

"It's not best for ME. I'm missing most of the festival", he mumbled under his breath.

His mother clicked her tongue like she always did when he was being difficult.

CRACK

The sound split the air like lightning striking stone. The pack animals didn't even flinch, but something deep in his chest jumped.

She looked more serious than he remembered seeing her. "Egmund, the world doesn't always wait for us to be ready. I know you want to be at the festival, but some of us have been put in place to protect others from-"

"WICKED MEN!"

He awoke with a start.

Egmund groaned. The morning light pierced his skull as he sat up. He looked around his room. A bench, a table, a stool, a bucket, a large chair; his aunt asleep in it. His boots and clothes on a chest at the end of the bed.

He took in a sharp breath as the pain in his head surged. His aunt woke up with a start.

"Thank the Older Ones", she sighed when she saw him awake.

Egmund chuckled. "All of them?" Then he winced. Laughing hurt.

"Yes. All of them. Last night I was sure Odeous himself had touched the family. You collapsed on the floor in the middle of a dance. We couldn't wake you.", she continued. "Your cheek might hurt a little this morning."

Egmund held his jaw. "My head actually."

"Well maybe you deserve it. How much festival wine did you have?"

"I don't know", he shrugged. "I don't remember drinking much."

"Well now we know you're a lightweight."

He winced and grabbed his head as spikes shot through it again. Moaning he said: "I might avoid the festival wine in the future. It gave me strange dreams."

"Dreams? What kind of dreams?"

The look on her face gave him pause. "My parents. Why?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then pulled a leather cord from out of her shirt and over her head. On it hung a small pendant. She held it out to him. He reached out and she dropped it into his hand.

The pendant was cold in his hands. Entirely made of a silvery and black metal. Shaped into a tree in full growth, its base becoming a fox with the ears of a rabbit. A grin of needle-like teeth glared at him.

“This is Yata”, the cold had left the pendant and gone down his spine. “Why are you giving me an effigy of an Older One?”

“It was your mother’s”, she went back to sorting papers. “I found it in her things.”

“Why would she have this?”, letting the pendant dangle from the cord.

“I asked her that myself once. Nila was fascinated with the Older Ones. It worried me. She said ‘I wear it so I remember what not to become.’”, she shrugged. “Yata the Protector. They say she walked our world at night, keeping us safe from the rest.”

He held the cord up so he could see the pendant closer. The fox’s grin was nothing but fangs. “What should I do with it?”

“Wear it.”

“I can’t do that! What if someone saw?”

“It’s Yata boy. No one would stone you for that. I want you to wear it.”

“Why?”

She shuffled papers around the desk. “You’re wise to fear the Older Ones. You’re Leader now. You put your blood on their Stone. Yata protects at night. Wear it”, she looked him in the eye, “please.”

He quietly slipped it over his head, tucking the pendant into his shirt, the cold in his spine moving to his chest.

With a sharp nod she hugged him. “Now finish cleaning up here. [??] doesn’t need to do your work. Then pack and get to bed. An early start tomorrow.”

“Thank you”, he said. She patted him on the arm and left the room. He pulled the pendant out, holding it up again. The fox was still grinning.

“Have we not had enough death on Sillum lands?”, Petr asked.

Council members and heads of smaller houses were gathered in the main hall, the wide doors closed, rumors would already be spreading.

Egmund sat quietly, listening to arguments he hadn’t expected. He regretted not paying more attention to council meetings. He thought he’d had time.

Laya said: “We’ve seen where this goes.” She leaned forward onto her wounded arm. “Without support, Sillum lands will be overrun.”

Colus, the upland farmer, had a say: “Come Petr, it isn’t only Sillum on Sillum lands these days. My Ragva has a full family not a days ride from Thornvaal.”

“Then she can bring her brood upland. The Warpact are at home on the sea, she can come to the mountains.”

Old Gala snapped: “Fool! They had no problem living in Sillum towns and houses last time.”

“And then King Torstin drove them away! Let the great warrior do what he’s best at again.” said Petr.

Henrik said: “Even the greatest warrior our land has ever seen can’t stand against them alone. I’m not afraid to go fight.” Petr’s face turned red. Henrik put his hand up. “Anyway, it isn’t our decision.” He looked at Egmond. “Leader. You know what your father would do.”

Egmond looked down at the table. Bjorn was Petr’s only child and Egmond’s childhood friend. Petr wanted Bjorn to take over as cooper. Bjorn had been talking about finding a life down mountain for a few years.

In the silence, Laya said: “What Gaior and Nila would do isn’t important now. What matters is what Egmond will do.”

Egmond looked up and into Petr’s eyes. “If Heilingsson doesn’t defend Sillum lands, we make a liar of my parents.”

Petr’s eyes went down to the table and Henrik clapped Egmond on the back.

“It’s all well and good saying we’ve got to fight”, Healer said, “Who goes?” She looked around the group. Henrik and Egmond were noticeably younger than the council. Laya and Petr were both middle aged. Healer, Kolbrun, and Colus were all grey. And Old Gala was...no one really knew how old. She just kept going.

“The youth will have to take our own future by the braid.” Henrik looked at Petr. “Bjorn will be with me. I’ll keep him safe.” Petr nodded but didn’t look up.

All eyes moved to Egmond. Egmond looked at Laya, her face unreadable. He was Leader. “Heilingsson goes to war.”

Chapter 3

Tormund barged in while Egmond dug in a flurry through his trunk.

Egmond looked up: “Need something?”

“Hey Egmond, I mean Leader-”

“Don’t do that Tor.”

Tormund grinned. “Ok Egmond. I was coming to check on you. Have you been outside? It’s like three feast days happening at once.”

“I haven’t had a chance yet”, Egmond got off the ground and lifted his mattress, his eyes searching. He tossed it aside and dug through the frame. “Tor, you don’t have any spare fishing line do you?”

“Uh spare? No.” Tormund kicked the blankets aside and avoided eye contact.

“Didn’t you just get some last week?”

“Yeah. But I’m going to need that.”

“I actually need it though. It takes five days to get to Thornvaal and I don’t think cook can spare enough provisions on such short notice.”

“Well that’s ok. You can borrow mine whenever you need it.” He didn’t leave to go get it.

Egmond straightened. “What’s going on Tor?”

Tormund shuffled his feet then looked Egmond in the eyes. “Well I’m going to need it. I’m going too.”

“To Thornvaal?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Is this when ‘Leader’ comes out?”

“That’s not fair! In fact if I wasn’t Leader they probably wouldn’t *let* me go. And you’re two years younger than me.”

“And I’m the fastest messenger in the clan!”

Egmond sighed.

“Come on, let’s go find a stall. I need some fishing line.”

They pushed their way through the house to the main hall. Children ran everywhere like a feastday celebration. Over on the benches Henrik laughed and clapped Bjorn on the back, the warriors checking and rechecking their bags and provisions. Cook and her staff rushed around handing out leftover cloudberry cakes. Tormund nearly clung to his hip.

Marta rushed into the hall carrying a bag. She grabbed some cake from cook, shoving it into her mouth. She waved Egmond down and ran over.

“Isn’t this all so exciting? I mean I know it’s not good that we *have* to go, I know that, but everyone is running around like mad. Did you see the village outside? I didn’t even know our clan was this big! What kind of things are you bringing? I have been on trips before so I just packed like that, do you think I’ll need anything special this time?”

Egmond sighed. “You can’t go. We’re going to war. It’s not a ‘trip.’”

She straightened and pointed to Tormund's pack. "If this *slip of a boy* can go to war then so can I".

"Hey I'm 15! Warriors in olden days were legends by my age."

"And they rarely saw 20", she snapped. "I may not be a warrior but I'm clever, I can do anything needed in camp. Or did you think a bunch of Warriors were going to mending their own trousers or cook meals in the middle of swinging an axe? And you", her finger snapped to Egmond, "need someone to watch you."

He scratched at his face. "I didn't think about that. The camp help I mean."

"See? You're Leader now Egmond. You need someone to remind you to think about things like that. Close your mouth Tormund."

His aunt walked up just then. "She's right you know. Leaders need council. People they can trust, whose opinions they trust."

Marta and Laya eyed each other. Egmond said: "I thought you were my council."

"I'm glad. And I am. But I won't always be. And she's right about the camp. Warriors need help too."

Her gaze moved to Tormund now who tried to hold it. "One need not risk death to be a hero."

She gestured to the quickly emptying hall. "I came to tell you that the march has already started. All of you, gather your things and get on the road. We've a long walk ahead of us."

The stars shone in a cloudless sky, breaking through the light of hundreds of campfires, which mirrored the stars on the ground. Everywhere Egmond looked, groups of people gathered around those fires laughing, telling stories, greeting old friends, making meals, the festival feel persisting on the march.

Egmond's tent was set up some distance away in the woods, but he found himself drawn to be with friends. Tormund stirred a pot and punched Bjorn in the shoulder when the older, larger boy dipped a finger into the pot. Marta, putting another log on the fire, rolled her eyes at him.

"Well, when is it gonna be done?", Bjorn laughed. "I'm starving and it smells so good."

"You'll survive," Marta said.

"Barely!", Bjorn could be dramatic.

"Look at you," scoffed Marta, "you're twice the size you were two years ago."

"That's because I'm a man now," he grinned and Marta rolled her eyes again. That was common when she was around Bjorn.

"C'mon Tor," whined Bjorn, as manly as he was able. He poked at the pot again pulling his hand away when Tormund swatted at it with the spoon.

“Not much longer,” Tormund went back to stirring, as used to their bickering as Egmond was. “You have to let the root soften enough. Toss me the jarra leaves.”, he crumbled them up and dropped them in. In a few moments a spicy smell filled the area. Tormund kept his head well clear of the vapors rising from the pot.

Henrik came into the light and sat down heavily against a log. Almost a decade older than Egmond and Bjorn, he’d taken them under his wing years ago and had become an older brother. “Tor, it smells amazing.”

Bjorn stuck a finger in again. “Where’d you learn to make this?”

Henrik leaned forward, dipping a spoon into the stew. “Old messenger trick isn’t it?”

Tormund nodded. “My granda taught me. It’s good to be able to travel light, helps to know how to make some meals from stuff you can find in the wilds.”

Bjorn said, “I can’t believe you put flowers in though.”

Marta looked up from oiling her boots. “Gran uses flowers all the time in her mixtures. Usually tastes awful! Oh, but she does make a lovely summer tea from flowers! What kind did you use Tormund?”

“That’s a secret,” Tormund winked.

“Oh please,” Marta peaked into the pot. “All I have to do is see them, I may not be a Lorekeeper but Gran still filled my head with lessons on plants and their uses. Is it lilac? Rose?”

“You’ll see.” said Tormund, warding her away with his spoon as he filled a bowl, topping it off with another dusting of dried jarra leaves before handing it to Marta. Bjorn filled a bowl and Henrik reached over, taking the bowl for himself with a grin. Egmond filled his own bowl, laughing at the strained impatience on Bjorn’s face.

Conversation paused while bowls filled, spoons dipped, mouths blew away heat and savored first bites.

It was a thick stew. Large, gray root chunks covered in a bright red sauce sprinkled with herbs. Sweet at first, with an aftertaste that bordered on painful but just pulled back.

Bjorn waved at his mouth. “Odeous that’s like a fire!”

Marta spooned broth into her mouth and her eyes widened. Egmond could tell she suppressed her reaction. She loved showing up Bjorn.

Henrik smiled. “Tor, this is a treat. It’s been too long.”

Bjorn asked, “Why don’t you make it then? Didn’t look too hard,” taking another bite to relieve the pain.

Henrik laughed. “You get the timing wrong on the jarra leaves *or* the biscus root and you’ll be in the woods all night leaving a mess.” He filled his spoon, “plus, I don’t know any of the other ingredients. He took another bite and closed his eyes with a sigh.” “I could learn, but it’s always better when someone else makes it anyway.”

Tormund beamed. Bjorn scooped the dregs from his bowl and went for a second, Marta right behind him. They ate in silence again. Egmond picked at his bowl. It was a fantastic flavor, and the spice stabbed in his mouth, his attention drifted anyway.

“How is the rest of the camp?”, he asked.

Henrik looked up. “Busy. People have been itching for this. I know I have.”

Bjorn puffed up. “I know I’m ready.”

Marta laughed loudly. “You’re always felt ready for everything according to you.”

Bjorn scowled, but his response was interrupted by laughter filtering in from the nearest campfire. Somewhere in the trees someone was playing pipes, drunken voices accompanied. The wine had followed from the festival.

Into their fire, Egmond asked: “What do you think happens when we die?”

Three faces looked at him in silence. Henrik put down his bowl. “We’re gonna be ok Egmond. Stick close to me and you’ll be ok.”

Egmond sighed. “I know...I was just...I’ve just been thinking about it lately.”

Marta placed her bowl in her lap. “According to Gran’s stories, the Older Ones accept us into their realm. If we earned it in this life at least.”

“What does it take to earn it?”

“In the stories, it’s always some grand deed, or being a hero, but those stories are always about Odeous or Soros or Jahron, everyone’s always dying. There is a story about an old woman who saves some sheep and Yata likes that,” she shrugged.

Tormund leaned forward and scooped another bowl full. “Well my da says that back in the old days, the Older Ones ate us.” He handed the bowl to Bjorn who dug in quietly.

“I expect a Lorekeeper knows better than your Da, Tormund,” said Marta.

Tormund shrugged.

“Warrior tales agree with your Gran, Marta,” said Henrik. He pointed his spoon at Bjorn. “In fact, part of the warrior vow covers that, right?”

With sauce on his face, Bjorn swallowed and said, “Right. The part about ‘going to the All’?”

Henrik recited in a light chant. “And when my life be past and gone, the All take me, to fight on. My death must serve before I become one.”

“‘Become one’? With what?”, Egmond asked. “And what’s ‘the All’?”

Tormund perked up. “I know this one! The All is the source of the Older Ones...”, he scrunched his face, “or their parent? Or something like that.”

“Nobody really believes that stuff anymore do they?”, Bjorn asked, running his finger around his bowl, licking up the last of the sauce.

“Gran does,” said Marta, scrunching up her face. “I don’t get it honestly...What?”, she said at their shocked faces, “if the Older Ones were ever real, they aren’t doing much these days are they?”

Henrik said, “Don’t say that around warriors, quite a few of them would curse you as a blasphemer.”

Her eyebrows rose. “That can’t be true! Gran only talks about the Older Ones at home, I’ve heard warriors in the great hall, they don’t keep their mouths shut about anything!”

Henrik laughed. “Thanks for that vote of confidence. Well, you’re welcome to believe what you want, but I think you’d be surprised. The Older Ones are interwoven in our lives much more than you realize.”

Egmund put his hand up to his chest feeling the pendant of Yata.

Chapter 4

Old Angla kept looking over her shoulder at him, scowling. Why did she come anyway? The road was engorged with the crowds, like a migration out of Elderglen. Thousands of people, some still in festival garb, heading to war, to save another clan. The festival atmosphere still hung in the air through laughter and chatter. He caught sight of Angla again. Definitely a stink eye.

They had been walking since before sunup and it was nearly midday. He walked beside his aunt over the gravelly trail. Henrik, Bjorn, and Tormund trailed behind, the older man gesturing with a sword while Bjorn laughed and Tormund listened in rapt attention

“What’s it going to be like?”

His aunt looked sideways at him.

“Battle”, he said.

She was silent a few moments. “Chaos. It was chaos.”

Henrik stepped up from behind. “There is order in it surely? I’ve been in fights and skirmishes. It shouldn’t differ except in the number of people involved.”

Laya pursed her lips. “It shouldn’t”, she said. “But it does.”

Egmund had to know. “Different how?”

She gestured at Henrik. “Your skirmishes and fights were over hot blood and disagreements. Battles are fought with desperation. A fight outside a drinking house, or members of two clans arguing over a border or a sheep.” She locked eyes with Henrik. “Have you killed?”

“A few times”, he said.

“At least you have that off your back.” Henrik nodded.

Egmund fiddled with his sword. “What if you haven’t killed?”

She walked in silence a few steps. “If we’re lucky, you won’t need to. If we’re lucky, the Warpact will raid a few more times, then wait again until next season.”

“They won’t”, said Henrik.

“I hope they don’t”, Tormund spoke up. “I mean, I don’t want anyone hurt. But I want to fight them. I want to make them pay.”

“And why would you fight them youngling?”, asked Laya.

Red in the face, Tormund said: “I am not too young to fight.”

“You are!” Bjorn laughed from behind. Tormund punched his arm and they tussled back and forth.

“He’s probably no younger than you were when you fought Warpact”, Henrik said.

Her eyes burned a fire at Henrik. “I didn’t have a choice”, she said. “And it didn’t end well.”

“Neither do I!”, Tormund snapped, wrenching his head out of Bjorn’s arm, then looked down when her fire turned on him. “Sorry. But they’re coming for our people too, and I can help our people.”

Bjorn shoved Tormund, laughing, and Egmund caught him as he stumbled. “You are a help to our people. We rely on your message running.”

Laya’s eyes had cooled. “Battles *turn* on message running.”

Tormund fell back a few steps. “I want to fight.” He didn’t say it loudly though.

They entered into Oronskar lands with no pomp, crossing the boundary at a vague point in the woods. As they travelled they spread the word to whoever they came across, most often meeting confusion and indifference at the King’s summons.

The forest abruptly ended at the base of a plateau, the site of the Oronskar main village. The climb back up was short and easy. Cresting the ridge, before them lay a field of long, golden grasses. The wind flowing down the mountain moved the grass in lazy waves.

In the middle of fields of grass was the village. After the festival crowds back home, the smattering of people was shocking. The people he saw out in the village would have barely filled the Heilingsson clan house in winter. They would likely not fill the Oronskar clan house either. Only a few houses had smoke plumes. Some had plants growing through windows. The main hall appeared well maintained, though it had its fair share of wild plants around the edges, they didn’t seem to be a conquering force. Egmund

had the majority of his people stay at the edge of the village and went in with a small contingent. No one seemed to pay any attention to them, other than a few sneers.

The doors to the main hall were open, the cavernous space was mostly shadow with splashes of gray light through a few windows, edges and tables flickering in candlelight. Only a few faces turned as Egmond's group walked in.

On the dais at the back of the room sat the Leaders of clan Oronskar. Egmond vaguely remembered meeting them when he was very young. What little hair Hroldan had was long, gray, and wispy. The man had the bulk of a warrior though. His wife was noticeably younger than him. A striking woman, her straight black hair gave her a severe appearance.

A small, weedy man was speaking to Hroldan. "He's not even bothered to offer recompense", pointing to the man next to him. The man in question was almost comically opposite to the first. Tall, well built, younger, though his clothes were in the same tattered state.

"If he can't be bothered with upkeep on his fence, that's no business of mine."

"The fence was *fine* until your brats used it for axe practice!"

The second man stepped forward, looming over the smaller man. "You've got no proof at all of that. Your flock's what damaged it I'd bet, trying their best to get away from that farm probably, and find some real food out in the wild."

"Sheep don't use axes you fool!" challenged the small man.

Hroldan stopped fiddling with his cup and finally looked up at the men. "Solion, if you can't produce witnesses, you've got no ground to stand on. Fix your fence. If you're lucky, your sheep will return home on their own. Otherwise I'd expect you'll want to spend your time searching for them instead of wasting *my* time with petty squabbles." The man started to protest until Hroldan snapped: "That's my judgement!"

Solion grumbled and shuffled out of the hall, while the grinning man went to sit down with a handful of clan members drinking and gaming at tables.

Hroldan leaned back in his chair, a smirk spreading on his face as he took in Egmond. "The meddler's boy has come to my doorstep finally. Have you tired of enticing away my clansmen with your schemes?"

"Leader Oronskar", Egmond hesitated. "it is a pleasure to be in your house again. I apologize for any confusion. Clan Heilingsson travels to Sillum lands, to the sea. We have been summoned by the King, he needs-"

"A kingdom's woes are the woes of kings," Hroldan interrupted, leaning back in his seat. "And as I am not king, I do not see how this matters to me. If Torstin doesn't have the men to hold his kingdom, he shouldn't have put himself forward as king." He narrowed his eyes and set his cup on the table firmly: "Or maybe others shouldn't have set him up as king."

Henrik broke in. “The Warpact don’t care about petty squabbles. They’ll kill Oronskar as quick as Heilingsson.”

“Not if we don’t go”, Hroldan said with a smile.

Laya spoke up. “Two out of the last five winters, you’ve called on Heilingsson for trade because your stores ran out”, she stared him down. “We’ll see how this conversation sits next time.”

Hroldan’s eyes narrowed again. Egmond put his hand in front of his aunt and stepped forward.

“The Warpact ships have returned. They threaten the coast again and if they take hold again...”, he gestured slightly, indicating the clan’s hall and those within it, “Your people, my people, we will be next.” He grasped at this opening. “We’re not here because the king commands it. We’re here because every clan has something to lose if we don’t stand together.”

“FAH!”, Hroldan slammed his cup down this time. “The king has the strength or he doesn’t. You are welcome as guests of Oronskar. The Green should hold your people just fine. Tomorrow you leave. Oronskar stays.”

Egmond stepped back and bowed stiffly. “Heilingsson is grateful for your hospitality.” A jug of mead and a hank of dried venison were shoved into his hands from behind. He walked forward and placed them on the table on the dais. Bowing his head he turned and walked out of the hall.

Outside Henrik didn’t hold back. “That old fool. Does he think the Warpact won’t come for his people if Sillum falls?”

Laya chimed in. “He’s always been one to hedge. You may not believe it’s possible, but he’s seen Torstin fight. He probably thinks the Warpact will be rebuffed again. He might think it’s worthwhile to whittle down Sillum warriors for an unknown future.”

“He wouldn’t work with the Warpact would he?”, Egmond asked.

Laya glanced at him. “I think he’s an idiot, but I’m not sure he’s a snake”, she looked back at the main house, “...I don’t know.”

“Do you think the other clans will answer the King’s call? The Northern clans will come won’t they? The Warpact never made it past the Spine Islands last time did they? What if they feel safe to let Sillum fall?”

“Warpact made it to the North back then, just not in great numbers. Clan Vyoss lost the most out of the Northern clans, but that was mostly fishing ships. The Islands are navigable but risky”, she hesitated. “Honestly? I don’t know. I think some will. Vyoss argued for a kingdom almost as strongly as your father.”

Henrik laughed heartily. “In the end it’s no worry. The smaller families down-mountain will have more able warriors anyway.”

Back on the green, tents were being erected and fires started. No real bed tonight after all. He really had made a pact with the Older Ones.

Egmund is a child. His mother is holding him in her arms. She is young.

They sit in a round stone room with wide windows. The windows overlook a sea of grass bowing in the wind. The sea crashes against a forest of trees in the distance.

His father walks in and sits opposite them on a stone bench.

“They won’t return for a bit”, he grins. “I think he couldn’t wait for me to leave them alone anyway.”

“They’ve found each other”, his mother says. “I think it’s cute”, she smiles up at his father. “Maybe I should only see you a few times a year, then you’d want to take me off into the woods.”

His father laughs. He grows quiet. Thoughtful.

“Nil”, he hesitates. “I think he’s right.” He stands up and paces. “Fel’s ritual is the only hope. You saw how exhausted he was. When we’re done here, we will go back to Heilingsson...and he will go back to death. How can we deny him?”

“We *SHOULD* deny him!” his mother screams. His father doesn’t react, searching her eyes.

“It’s dangerous”, his mother says. She smiles at Egmund in her arms and puts him down. “Go play honey.” Egmund runs to a pile of wooden toys.

“I know it’s dangerous”, his father grabs her hands. “If he can’t stop them, they’ll be in our lands by winter. You said yourself it needn’t be human blood.”

“No it needn’t. Unwilling blood is all they ask”, she says quietly. “ALL THEY ASK?!” she screeches. “Not for this kind of power”, she says. “Animal blood would suffice.”

“And it needs three”, his father says grimly. “You know she won’t help.”

“No...she won’t.”

“I don’t know if we can stop them any other way. Our home would fall. Egmund’s home my love.”

She looks up at him, tears in her eyes. “It can be done.” Egmund giggles in the corner, lost in his worlds. “It will be done.”

Egmund work early the next morning, drenched in sweat.

After dinner the previous night, Hroldan and his wife had left without a word to the Heilingsson members. They slept on the village green.

He got up from his sleeping roll and stepped outside the tent to relieve himself. On the way back up the hillside from the privvy a voice brought him up short.

“Why do you worship this king of yours?”

The acidic voice belonged to the wife of Hrolddan. She came out of the misted wood. She was a tall woman, with an icy face and straight black hair. She wore a fur cloak against the morning chill.

“Leader Oronskar”, he fumbled, “this is unexpected.”

“We met last night and yet you have expectations of my morning activities?”

“I apologize Leader. Obviously I have no say of what happens on Oronskar land.”

“Obviously”, she held his gaze then started walking uphill. “I would ask you again. Why do you worship King Torstin?”

He quickly fell in step with her. “I don’t worship him. Not in the sense of the Older Ones or anything like that.”

“Do you not swear fealty to him? They say that people of the lands outside make oaths to give their lives for their sovereign. Is this what you will do?”

“He is my uncle. And he is the King of our land. I would die fighting for him. I hope not to.”

“What has he done to deserve this of you?”

“Leader”, he struggled for words. “This is the price of a kingdom. My father...”

“Your father”, she cut him off, “was a good man. He did not worship a king.”

“He knew we needed to be one people”, Egmond felt frustration welling up. “As your own husband says. My father installed a King. Because he believed that was what we needed. As you say, my father was a good man. Can you not trust him?”

“Your father was a good man. He was misguided. As was your mother.”

“Did you know my parents well?”

She regarded him for a moment. “Your mother and I were childhood friends. As much as can be from two different clans. Your grandfather took his prized daughters everywhere with him. So we became friends. We spent hours in these woods. She loved exploring them, especially in the darkness. I am sorry they are gone.”

He stopped walking. She turned, looking at him expectantly.

“I...my apologies...Leader. I did not know you were close with them.” She nodded and began walking again.

He followed in silence. Then: “I remember coming here as a child. Your woods were always so frightening to me. So different from the land up at Heilingsson”, he looked around at the thick canopy. The morning mist turning the trees into great guardians of the unknown.

“They say the woods of Oronskar held safety all the way back to the origins of our people.”

“They say the same about Heilingsson mountains”, he smiled. “I suspect every clan says that about their own lands.”

“Perhaps.”

Rocks and leaves crunching under foot, they walked in silence for a time.

“Leader”, Egmond broke the quiet, “If you knew my parents in their youth, then you know what the Warpact are capable of. You know they won’t stop. King Torstin drove them away last time. We all owe him our lives. My father and mother saw that. That’s why they gave their loyalty. Oronskar will be safest if we work together.”

The ground had flattened out, they were back among the scattered buildings.

“The people of Oronskar will be safest where everyone can be trusted.”

Incredulous Egmond paused. “Are you implying Heilingsson or Sillum can’t be trusted? It has been *many* generations since there was war between our clans. I’ve heard other clans refer to our side of the island as the ‘place of peace’!”

She had walked him to the village green, overflowing with Heilingsson, taking down tents, packing donkeys, preparing to leave. Giving him an icy glare she said: “There are more dangers than battle young Leader. I will protect my people. See to yours.”

With that she turned and walked away.

Chapter 5

They were marching through the woods, the sun peeking over the treetops, when his aunt returned from scouting carrying a body over her shoulder. Egmond rushed over. She lowered the body to the ground, at first he thought it was a child, a large one at least, but now that Egmond saw the face, he could clearly see it was a young woman.

There was a crowd of people gathering around and Laya called for a healer. “We found her washed up on the bank, she was breathing but didn’t respond. She has a few bruises but no other injuries I could see.”

A healer ran up, pushed Laya aside, and started poking at the woman. His aunt left the woman with the healer and pulled Egmond aside. “Well Leader...what do you make of that?”

Egmond started to answer “She probably fell in up-river–”, then stopped himself and pointed out: “There is no river around here. What ‘bank’?”

Laya bobbed her pointing finger at him. “The bank...of a pond. We could see the other side, it was in a small gully. And I hope your next question is ‘Where did she come from?’ because I have no idea.” She slung a pack off of her back, made of a material Egmond didn’t recognize. Like canvas but it shone in the

sunlight. “This was all I found near her. It’s incredibly sturdy, but look”, she held it up, showing off the gaping hole in the bottom. Just a few odds and ends left, and I don’t know what to make of them.

“Actually, my next question was going to be ‘What happened to her?’ ”.

The healer had finished with the woman and waved them over. They knelt by her and the healer said: “I can find no problem. She’s got some small cuts and scrapes, but there is no blood on her clothes, even where it’s torn in a few places. From what I can tell, she is going to be ok. She just won’t wake up. I expect she needs the rest. She seems to have been through...something.”

The crowd was muttering around them. Henrik asked the question on the wind. “Is she Warpact?”

Egmund sat back on his heels, then looked at his aunt. “Is she Warpact?”

“Doesn’t look like any of them that I’ve seen. She’s so small.”

Egmund stood up. “I think we should take a break. Get her into a sleeping roll, maybe she’ll wake in a little bit?”

Henrik said: “It’s not even mid-morning. We can’t waste time. For all we know Warpact are raiding Thornvaal right now. Maybe she’s a distraction?”, he shrugged.

Laya came out of her crouch: “I doubt the Warpact found out we were coming, then planted an unconscious woman by a pond in the middle of the woods, hoping we would walk by and take a long break”.

Henrik went red in the face. “That doesn’t change the fact that every moment we delay is dangerous.”

Egmund said: “I’m not leaving her here, and we can’t haul her across country on a pack horse without knowing what’s wrong with her. Just”, he put both hands up, palms facing Henrik, “be patient, I’ll figure something out.”

Henrik grunted and nodded. “Ok. Patience, sorry.”

They put up a tent to keep the woman out of the mid-day sun.

Marta meets Stranger

Draft

Marta watched them lift the unconscious woman and carry her inside the tent, the healer followed. This was interesting.

She ran off to grab some clean linens & a spare dress out of her supplies.

When she got back Laya was leaving the tent. That was good. Laya tended to watch Marta more than others. She knew that Marta got up to more trouble than she let on.

Marta slipped into the tent and Healer looked up.

“I brought some clothes and linens”, holding them up with a smile on her face.

“Put them over there”, Healer gestured impatiently, “and run and get me some water too. And have them start a fire!”

Marta dashed out of the tent again. When she returned, the woman was on a sleeping roll, only her head peeked out from under the blanket. Marta knelt, handing Healer the water jug, examining the woman. Her hair, dark as deepest night, was straight and shiny. Nothing like Marta’s curly brown hair. Had it ever glistened like that? The stranger’s hair was so dark it had a purple tinge. She asked: “What’s wrong with her?”

“Don’t know. Can’t find a single injury.”

“You ever met anyone that short?”

“Met a few of the outsiders”, Healer sat back, digging through her bag. “Traders and the like. They tend to be shorter than our lot.” She looked again at the woman. “Suppose not as short as her though.”

The tent flap moved aside just then. Laya stepped through, followed by Egmond. “What are you doing here?” Laya asked Marta.

“Thought I’d help Healer”, she held up the linens and smiled as sweet as she could. Healer snorted.

Laya grunted.

Egmond asked Healer: “Any change?”

“It’s only been-”, she cut off because the woman rolled over and opened her eyes. They were as black as her hair. She looked right at Egmond and smiled, like someone just waking from a nap with no responsibilities. And then they went wide and she screamed.

They all jumped. The stranger doubled over, holding her head, halfway through scrabbling out of the bedroll. Healer reached for her, poking and prodding, the woman didn’t resist. The pain seemed to pass and she settled back, eyes darting back and forth between all of them. Healer shook her head. “If she’s injured in the head, there isn’t much I can do but make her sleep and rest.”

The stranger said something in a different language. It was clearly a question. Egmond looked at Laya. “Do you recognize that?” Laya shook her head.

Egmond’s hands went up in a placating gesture, but that made the woman jump. He backed away a little and knelt down. “It’s ok. You’re safe, we won’t hurt you.” She continued darting her eyes around in silence, like a frightened and cornered animal. He looked at Laya over his shoulder. “I don’t think she’s going to be much of a danger.”

“Better safe than sorry”, she said with a straight face. “I say kill her, don’t take the chance.”

Three sets of eyes snapped to her face, but the stranger didn’t react. Then she saw the look on their faces and she redoubled her eye darting.

Laya waved them down with her good hand. “Relax. I was looking for a reaction. From her, not you lot. She only got worried after you did.”

Egmund forced a dreadful smile at the woman. Marta couldn’t handle it, she guffawed. “That’s going to frighten her more!” His mouth tightened.

The woman’s eyes moved like an evading hare.

Laya lightly slapped his arm and pulled him back a little. She squatted, her wounded arm resting on her thigh, and stared into the stranger’s eyes. The woman met her gaze with wide, unmoving eyes. Laya searched them intently. The stranger’s eyes rolled back in her head. Egmund caught her as she fainted.

Laya stood up, moved to the corner of the tent and sat on the ground. “I’ll keep an eye on her. Go, deal with Henrik.”

Egmund lowered the woman to the bedroll, adjusting it under her. He looked up at Healer. “She’s not going anywhere soon is she?”

“No, lad.”

He stood up and sighed. “What do I tell Henrik?”, he asked his aunt.

“You’re Leader Egmund. You’ve got to decide that.”

He put his hands on his hips and looked up at the roof of the tent. “I’m going to send the warriors on ahead, without us they’ll make it to Thornvaal in double time anyway.”

Laya nodded and said nothing. Egmund ducked out of the tent.

Laya looked at Marta, then at Healer. “Don’t mind me”, she leaned back against the canvas.

Nobody said much of anything after that.

Chapter 6

The woman slept like a stone for a few days. If she was awake when Egmund was around, she seemed troubled. He wasn’t sure he felt comfortable with her either after that dream.

Healer said she wasn’t communicating much at all when he wasn’t around. She had taken a liking to Marta though, that was good. Laya seemed confident the stranger wasn’t a threat. She had stopped staying in the tent with the woman.

So they waited. After four days, Healer said the woman could travel. They packed up their things and followed the trail left by the warriors.

Chapter 7

Marta woke abruptly to an empty tent. The stranger wasn't in her bedroll. Probably nothing to worry about?

Kicking her feet out of her blankets, she pulled on her shoes and rushed outside. The camp was silent, it was hours before sunup. She wandered around, hoping to see a sign of the stranger somewhere, but she found no disturbances, and no one awake, so she started circling the camp in the woods. She caught sight of a flash of light and saw the silhouette of the small woman, uphill, seated against a tree. The flash of light happened again, right in front of the woman, as if she was trying to start a fire.

Marta made her way up, not trying to be quiet. If the woman wasn't running away, there was no reason to sneak up on her right? She jumped anyway when Marta came out of the woods.

"Sorry", Marta said, seating herself against another tree across from the woman. She had set up at the end of a treeline on top of a steep hill. The moonlight sparkled against the fog peeking out of the miles of forest below them, and reflected off the ocean to the left, the shoreline like a white snake slithering across the land.

The stranger made a reassuring noise and sat back against her tree. She tucked something shiny into the pocket of her strange coat and looked out over the landscape.

The woman had only made it out of bed this morning, she'd barely been awake since they found her. Anytime someone tried to talk to her she looked terrified.

"Are you feeling ok?" Marta rubbed her stomach and made a face like she was nauseous. At first the woman looked confused then rubbed her stomach and stuck out a fist at Marta, with the thumb pointing up. Now Marta was the confused one and it must have shown on her face. The woman put a big smile on her face and both hands out in front of her in fists with the thumbs pointing up.

Marta hesitantly put her fist out with the thumb up and the woman nodded. At least it was something. Time to try something else.

"What is your name?" Marta pointed at herself. "Marta." Then at the woman. "You?"

In a heavy accent, she said a word that sounded remarkably like "stranger". Marta laughed and pointed at the woman. "Stranger?"

She nodded, repeating the word "stranger".

Marta pointed at the woman's pocket. "How were you making the spark earlier?" The woman confusedly raised her hand in a fist with thumb again, the hand that had been laying next to the pocket. "No, the

light”, Marta pointed up at the moon and froze mid-explanation.

Down below them, on the edge of the beach, just inside the forest, was a fire. Marta stood up abruptly, frightening the woman at first, then she followed Marta’s gaze. Mostly talking to herself Marta said: “The warriors should be days ahead of us. If they’ve only made it that far, why wouldn’t they have sent someone back to tell us?” She started off through the woods, heading downhill before she realized the woman was following her. “You can stay here”, she pointed back up the hill but Stranger didn’t seem to understand. “Just stay close ok?”

She should have realized how steep the hill was, with the unobstructed view up there. She found herself almost running downhill a few times, using trees and limbs to stop herself. The smaller woman didn’t have the problem, nimbly hopping downhill as if she was a mountain goat.

At the bottom, Marta stuck to the treeline along the beach. She didn’t exactly want to just clumsily walk up to this unknown camp in the woods in the middle of nowhere. The first thing she saw were ponies! And then she realized that was bad. They looked a lot like the horses the outsiders had brought to their island, but small. Not much bigger than the donkeys her people were used to. Ponies and horses were not common here, and right in front of her was a corral full of them.

To her left, out on the beach and into the ocean was a rocky outcrop. Crouching she ran out into the darkness. The rocks were large enough to hide behind, even at her height. From out here she could clearly see the camp. Huddled around a campfire, nestled into the edge of the woods, was a group of people in robes that came down to mid-calf. They didn’t look anything like her people.

Around 11 o’clock that night Egmond woke to the sound of muffled shouts. He got up and dressed quickly and went outside to see Marta whisper-shouting into tents “*wake up, invaders! wake up, invaders!*”

She saw him and rushed over, speaking normally. “The stranger and I were out fishing-”, she waved him off as he started to interrupt. “-and we saw some lights down the beach, so we snuck up on them in the woods, and saw a small camp with around 10 men, we couldn’t see too well without getting closer. They had some ponies and spears and were huddled real quiet around a small campfire.”

Egmond jumped in while she took a breath: “Were they wearing clan Sillum colors?”, that was all he got in.

“No they were dressed strangely, wearing robes and their hair was unbound, and they definitely didn’t look like they wanted to be found the way they huddled around their campfire, and anyway why is someone out here anyway? They definitely aren’t going up to Oronskar and they weren’t coming to see us, and if they were going to see someone from Sillum why are they here and not there and also how did they get here?”

Egmond was slightly taken aback because she had stopped herself talking and was waiting for him to respond. “I think we need to check this out, you and the stranger-”, he hesitated then said flatly: “Do you trust her?”

Marta just shrugged, the look on her face not giving much more.

“Ok, well she stays behind. I’m going to gather up some people, wait for us at the edge of camp.”

Egmund asked Marta: “You can remember where it is right?”

Marta gave him a look that made him feel like a little brother. “You may be older than me Egmund but I spend more time in the woods than you, and I can probably cook dinner in your tent without you knowing.”, she nodded matter-of-factly.

“I’d hoped we would at least outnumber them,” Laya said, looking back at the group behind them in the woods.

“How can you tell how many there are?”, Marta asked, peeking through the trees toward the Warpact camp. “I saw maybe twenty before, we’ve got more than that.”

The camp had roused in no time, word spread quickly and now, scattered through the woods was a disparate band of former warriors, hunters, and a few able-bodied men and women who at least knew how to wield a weapon.

Marta glanced behind her. People brought what weapons they could find. A woodsman’s axe, long hunting knives, some spears and bows, many of them held in hands gnarled with age, or carrying old injuries, like Laya with her missing fingers.

“I can’t be sure, but by the number of tents I’d expect at least twice that many.”

“Do you think we should try to gather more?”, she asked.

“Who?”, Laya asked quietly, keeping her eyes trained on the scout camp on the beach, just visible through the trees. “You don’t want to go into battle with someone who doesn’t want to be there.”

“I don’t want to go into battle at all...”, Marta spent her days weaving and finding adventure in the woods. Why would she want to be a warrior? You could die being a warrior.

Laya must have seen the look in her eyes. “You won’t be. Your job is to get word back to camp if this goes badly. Take them back up into the hills and hope they go south.”

Marta nodded, barely listening. “Are we sure we can’t just let them go in the morning?”

Laya’s flat look was enough of an answer.

“...Yeah...the horses.”, she perked up suddenly. “The horses! I’ve got an idea! Get them in position and then make your piper call.”

She rushed off into the woods, ignoring Laya’s hissed “Wait! Fool girl!”

She could never satisfy that woman.

The camp wasn't too big, she could easily navigate around it without alerting anyone. Marta spent much of her life in the woods. Too much according to Gran, who insisted Marta should be preparing to settle down by now. No thank you. There was too much out in the world to see. She could be a Hunter by now, except she liked animals too much.

She crept through the woods, quiet as a mouse in slippers. This was easy. Maybe she should see about being a Scout. But Scouts had to fight. She shivered.

Despite what she said to Laya, she didn't actually have a plan. She had an idea. Which was pretty close to a plan, she just needed to work through any kinks as they popped up. Hopefully she got the chance.

The sound of the waves was off to her left now, she should have wrapped around the camp. Making her way quietly back toward the beach, she got out her belt knife. Not that it would do much good in the face of a warrior, but she needed its tiny boost of confidence to keep going *toward* them. Alone.

Then she heard a whinny. Perfect! The horses were through the woods. Hopefully gathered together, or her idea might not work, and Laya would be in position soon. Maybe she already was. Marta hurried forward as quickly as she dared.

Thankfully the trees came right up to the beach, though they thinned considerably near the edge. She carefully worked her way from trunk to trunk, keeping alert for movement anywhere around. Nothing moved or called out a warning though. The Warpact clearly thought they were undetected and safe. Or they were sloppy.

In a small area, just under the trees, a long rope wrapped around trunks, creating a temporary coral for around 20 horses. Good, maybe that meant there were not as many Warpact as Laya feared.

Making quiet, comforting noises as she crept up, to let the horses know she was there, she slowly sawed through the thick rope. She didn't want to disturb the horses too soon.

By Yata, they were beautiful. She loved donkeys, and goats, all animals really, but this was only the third time in her life she'd been this close to horses. Even small ones like this were magnificent. Not native to their island, brought in by outsiders, they were incredibly rare still. And here she was within feet of twenty of them, and she was going to have to scare them instead of stroke their noses. It almost made her sad.

A piper called from the woods, on the other side of the camp.

Speeding up her sawing, made the nearest horses start shying away. That was fine, if they were tense this would work better. The knife finished the last strand of rope and it fell at her feet. Loosened, she heard it fall to the ground from other trees nearby.

Abruptly, she jumped up, arms and legs spread wide as she yelped loudly. It worked perfectly, the horses nearest bolted backwards, which caused a cascade of panic and a stampede as they ran off into the woods.

Shouts from the camp rang out. A few people started running to catch the horses. They were running straight at her. This is why ideas are better as plans.

Panicked, she reacted without thought. Grabbing stones from her feet she hurled them at the people and screamed her best mountain spirit scream. The one she used to frighten foolish boys who thought they were tough, camping in the woods, but not so tough to go check on the source of the noises.

It worked to a degree. A few of her stones found targets, that slowed them down. Then, on the other side of the camp, she watched as Laya coalesced out of the darkness at the base of a tree and stabbed a lone man in the throat. He hadn't even seen her.

Then the shouting started. People crashed out of the woods into the camp, swinging weapons, war-cries echoing off the rock formations that wrapped around the campsite.

The horses were forgotten. Marta wanted to run after them, run into the woods away from the shouts and screams. But she couldn't. She needed to see how it ended.

The tents emptied as Laya's people swept through the camp. She had been right, more than twenty people came out to fight, but it was over in what felt like twenty heartbeats. Before she realized, the shouting had died out, replaced by groans of the dying.

Laya stood in the center of the camp now, two men at her feet being tied up. One looked dead on his feet, a wound on his head bled heavily. Someone was already bandaging it. The other man was being held down by three Heilingsson. He kicked and spat and shouted what were clearly curses, though she didn't understand any of the words. Actually she caught one that sounded almost like 'demons!'. He kept going even when they gagged him.

Laya walked over to her at the edge of the camp.

"That was clever," she said. Compliments from her were hard to come by. "You're an idiot though. You should have told me what you were going to do."

Criticism wasn't hard to come by.

"Sorry," Marta mumbled. The battle was still repeating in her head. She probably should have. But people always tried to talk her out of her ideas, even when she knew she was right.

Laya watched her for a moment. The muffled shouts from the tied up prisoner drew her attention, a thoughtful look passed her face.

To Marta she said: "You definitely trust your new friend?"

Marta shrugged.

"She spent the first few days scared as a bird. She follows me around so tightly I think she might be tied to my waist, like that story about the shepherd and the maid. Except I don't know which one of us Soros is punishing. I found her tonight just sitting in the woods, like she was thinking. If she wanted to harm us, she easily could have by now."

Laya was watching the prisoners, both being dragged by two men back into the woods. One a dead weight,

the other fighting fury.

“I’ve got an idea I want to try. Let’s head back to camp.”

Chapter 8

“Is this what war is?”, Bjorn whined. “Just walking for days and days?”

“Sometimes,” said Henrik.

They left the others behind three days ago. Split the warriors and messengers from the helpers. The only change in the land in all that time was the angle of the hills. Barely. Even this close to Thornvaal, the hills were still steep in places, and no matter where they went, it was trees as far as the eye could see. If Egmond were traveling alone, he would be lost in minutes.

“This is nothing,” said Tormund, “a nice walk in the woods. Try covering this ground twice as fast with lives depending on it.”

Bjorn shoved him into a bush, laughing as Tormund struggled out. “The only lives that ever depended on your messages were sheep and goats.”

Tormund, red in the face, scrabbled to his feet. “I saved old Janna’s life that one time! Well...we thought she might be dead at least.”

“Yeah, but she was just drunk on cloudberry wine,” Bjorn chuckled.

“And if I hadn’t gotten her to sober up, she probably would have frozen in the heights watching the sheep.”

Henrik clipped Bjorn on the back of the head, curtailing any retort. “Sober up yourself warrior. The time for play is past.”

Bjorn rubbed the back of his head but held his tongue. Henrik could have fun, but when he was serious, he was deadly serious.

Egmond asked, “How from are we from Thornvaal do you think?”

Henrik looked around, as if this part of the forest was somehow obviously different than every other part they had travelled through. “I’d say we’ll get there just before nightfall.”

Egmond nodded. Henrik knew the land well. He visited Thornvaal at least once a year for the warrior games.

Egmond was about to ask when the next warrior games were, when shouts broke out near the front of the marching column. A scout ran through the crowd yelling: “Leader! Where is Egmond?”

Henrik shouted: “Here man!”

The man ran up to them, panting but in control enough to say: "Warpact spotted in the woods. A full camp, we don't know how many. One of our men walked right into it, said they were hidden like grubs in a log, down in a gully. He was spotted but got out before they reacted."

"What in all the worlds are they doing here?", Egmond asked. How did they get into these woods? Past Thornvaal?

He followed up with: "They couldn't have taken Thornvaal could they?"

"No chance, the castle there would hold out at least," said Henrik. To the scout he asked: "Have the other scouts been warned?"

"The scouts should be spreading out now." The man looked at Egmond, "What orders Leader?"

Egmond froze, all their eyes watched him. He had no idea what to do. He wasn't a warrior. He looked to Henrik but before he could say anything, more shouts broke out in front of them, and then screams behind followed by metal crashing on metal. The Warpact were on them.

Henrik and Bjorn took off toward the sounds in front, the bulk of the warriors were at the rear of the column. Egmond grabbed Tormund's sleeve as he ran after them.

"Tor! I need you to get to Thornvaal, warn them if they don't already know."

Tormund's face showed anger, but he didn't argue. He secured his pack on his back and took off through the woods like a deer in flight. Tormund alone could reach Thornvaal well before nightfall. If he made it through alive.

Egmond ran after Henrik and Bjorn. The front of the column was chaos, Warpact and Heilingsson warriors clashed all over the woods. It was impossible to tell how many there were, let alone who was winning. Heilingsson had brought a few thousand warriors in total, but they were so spread out, unprepared. This could be a bloodbath.

An unearthly scream from his right alerted him to the Warpact warrior bearing down on him. Egmond leapt back from a swiping sword. Someone stabbed the man with a spear. Egmond found himself facing two other men at the same time. One rushed in, screaming, his sword slashing wildly. Egmond's body contorted out of reflex, his sword chopping at the man's arm, slicing cleanly and the man dropped his sword. The second man was almost behind Egmond now and without thinking Egmond dropped to the ground, under a swing. That surprised the man who overbalanced, stumbling forward. Egmond instinctively stabbed him in as he passed by. The man's legs faltered and he collapsed in a heap, unmoving.

The shock of his first kill made him freeze. The battlefield slowed, moments stretching and sound deadening. A part of him hoped the man would move again. Live again.

Another scream from behind brought sound back in a rush. The battle sped up.

The first man, his arm useless, had picked up his sword in the other hand and rushed at Egmond again. Egmond parried, the man swiped again, Egmond parried again. The man kept swinging, persistent and

relentless. Egmond didn't have trouble parrying though. The man seemed to move slowly, maybe from the loss of blood? Egmond could dodge and parry everything the man tried, with ease. He realized he could kill the man as soon as he wanted. Did he want to? He'd already lost an arm, wasn't that enough?

Then he remembered these people had taken both his parents from him. Taken uncountable Heilingsson, family and friends, and uncountable members of other clans.

He swatted aside the man's sword. It was like playing a deadly game with a child. With nothing to defend himself, the Warpact couldn't stop Egmond stabbing him in the throat. He fell to the ground, his feet scrabbling lines in the forest floor. Egmond stabbed him again, and spit when the man stopped moving.

He stared for a few moments at the body. It didn't move anymore. His anger faded. He felt sick, and then realized the sounds of battle had died out. Heilingsson warriors picked up themselves and their fellows in every direction, bandaging wounds, gathering weapons, checking on the dead.

Henrik jogged up, worry etched on his face.

"A few of them ran, the scouts and hunters are harrying them. I doubt any will survive the day."

Coldly, Egmond said: "Don't let our men stray too far, it could be a trap." He didn't know why he felt this way. The anger had come on him as fast as it left, and it left him empty.

Henrik watched him. "Aye, they're smart, they'll hold close enough. We outnumbered them five to one I'd say. They must have been desperate."

He clapped Egmond on the shoulder. "You blooded your blade I see. Don't let it overtake you."

Egmond looked into his eyes. "They deserved it."

They did. He knew they did. He wanted to be happy about it.

"Lad...", Henrik hesitated, an unfamiliar look on him. "Bjorn took a wound."

No.

Henrik rushed on. "I think he'll live...but it's bad. Come on."

He followed Henrik further forward in the column. Injured men and women dotted the ground, moaning, crying out. The healer was back with the rest of their people, back with the strange woman, but all warriors knew the basics of bandaging wounds.

At one point, an injured Warpact warrior was struggling to get to his feet, blood gushing from a savage wound in his stomach. A Heilingsson warrior stepped up and severed his throat. Everyone knew what Warpact did to prisoners. Death was a kindness compared to that. They deserved death for what they brought to this land, but Egmond felt sick watching an injured man be slaughtered on the ground. If only the anger was still there.

The dead Warpact left his mind as he saw Bjorn on the ground, the dirt around him slick with red mud, a warrior cradled Bjorn's arm, bandages pressed tight against the wrist, where a hand should have been.

Other warriors were stoking a fire nearby, dropping sword tips into the flames. They were going to cauterize the wound.

Bjorn finally had his answer to what war would be like.

Egmund looked at Henrik. "We'll leave the wounded behind, a small group to guard them, the rest should catch up to them in a few days, Healer is with them."

Henrik nodded. "Aye, best chance probably."

"Let's get moving as soon as we can. We need to find out what's happened at Thornvaal."

He made himself stay to hear Bjorn's screams. He needed the anger back.

Egmund could barely believe the sight of Thornvaal, even though the scouts had warned him.

Leaving the woods revealed a view from the hills, over yellow grasslands with the sea in the distance. In between sea and grass stood Thornvaal, the largest city in the land.

The smoke rising from its roofs came from homes and shops, blacksmiths and tanneries. All the expected fires in a city and town, nothing abnormal. Thornvaal was untouched. Which meant the Warpact were out in the woods, and Thornvaal knew nothing about it.

How could a few hundred Warpact, at least, have bypassed the watchtowers? To the left of the city, a large hill rose, topped by the castle, stone a few shades more golden than the surrounding grasses. The castle stood like a sentinel on the edge of a cliff, its towers rising high above the sea, views unobstructed for miles, all the way out to the fog wall that had kept them apart from the world until twenty years ago.

Egmund sent the warriors into the town and surrounding lands. The leaders and strongest among them would stay at the clan's hall in the city center. One of the concessions of Torstin becoming king had assigned large houses to each clan, signifying that Thornvaal was more than the home of clan Sillum now. The Heilingsson warriors outside the city would set up camp, extending the borders of Thornvaal temporarily. It was a city with no walls, a thousand ways in and out to the countryside.

While the others went to the clan house and campsites, Egmund and Henrik headed up to the hill to the castle. The approach allowed the building to grow until its bulk became oppressive. All-encompassing and occupying the world in front of them, hiding the sight of the sea.

Entry was no issue, he was known here, what he didn't expect was to be greeted by the king and queen at entrance.

The sight of his aunt made his heart heart twinge, Tani looked much more like his mother than Laya did. In their youth, they likely looked identical, but a life as a warrior brought scars to Laya, and a life as queen distanced Tani from her even more, the latter had grown into her station over the years.

On the other hand, Torstin; his uncle and king, looked unchanged from the last time Enmund had seen him, five years ago. A little more gray in his long black beard, but huge and vital in every other way.

“Egmund!”, the King’s voice boomed out. An overwhelming man in more ways than one. “I knew I could depend on Heilingsson.” He said something else, but Egmund didn’t catch it. His vision darkened, the world going black for a moment, then his legs buckled.

Henrik caught him by the arm, the Queen ran forward.

“Hold now my boy!”, the King rushed over behind his wife. “Truly your warriors have at least given us respite, you needn’t have pushed so hard to get here.”

Egmund was standing on his own again. His vision still swam, but his feet were stable.

“Uncle, in the woods we found...”, he started before Torstin interrupted.

“No, we won’t talk of problems right now. You need rest. Just know that your warriors arrival last week was timely and without them we may not be standing here today”, he pulled Egmund into a large hug. “But no, we will not talk of that just now. We will have a celebration tonight at the table, but for now you will go rest.”

Chapter 9

It was incredible. Huge. Where do you look? Everywhere her eyes went, exciting things were happening.

The Heilingsson clan members made quite a crowd, walking through the streets of Thornvaal, dust of the road coloring their cloaks and boots, but the city barely noticed them.

Two men by a pen full of sheep shouted at each other. They walked down a street with three blacksmiths. Three! A baker piled breads in an open window. A baker! Back home, you baked your own bread, unless you were ill and then you ended up with more bread than you could eat, but imagine, someone who spent all their time baking bread, and rolls!, they had rolls! And they sold it all for money!

She heard of bakers, but she always thought it was some joke about city people being too dim to know how to bake. They didn’t seem that dim, well that man asleep in the gutter did, why not sleep at home?

And the buildings! Longhouses, like back home, timber frames, mud walls, one story with storage under the thatched roof. These were shrunken, could that even be called a “long” house still? How does a whole family fit in that? Well to be fair, some families were small, like her and Gran, but they lived in a cottage on the edge of the village, easier access to the wild plants they used in all Gran’s recipes and poultices and medicines.

The thought of Gran brought a pang of guilt. Gran wouldn’t be alone. Healer came to Thornvaal, people would come to Gran now. Plus she left a note. Gran would understand right? Marta couldn’t spend her whole life in a tiny cottage in the mountains when all this existed.

The only buildings around here the size of their cottage seemed to be shops, that one had bolts of beautiful fabrics, colors she didn't know existed, and that one three doors down was a shop that only sold baskets! Did people here make anything for themselves?

She caught Stranger's eye, the woman was looking at her oddly.

"Do you come from a place like this?", Marta asked suddenly. The woman was still a mystery after over a week of travel.

Stranger put on that confused look she usually had when you asked her a direct question. Marta made a sweeping motion and said: "City. Big.", spreading her arms wide. "You? City?", gesturing at the buildings all around.

Stranger's eyes took in the surroundings and back at Marta.

"Am city."

"Big?", Marta spread her arms again.

In response, Stranger spread her arms as wide as they would go and said: "Biiiiiig".

"What bigger than this?", Marta couldn't believe that. "Thornvaal is huge! I mean, I heard about it, how big it is, but I didn't know it was *this* big", they were ten minutes into the city and she couldn't see the end in sight. "The only other city near this big is Yeuleborg up North! I suppose there are cities in the outside world that might be bigger. Do you come from one of those?"

Stranger watched Marta for a moment, probably waiting to see if she was done talking, she knew she could talk a lot, and then the woman said: "Am biiiiiig."

Good enough. She nodded.

Laya stopped ahead of them, pointing down a side street. Directing the members of the clan unfamiliar with the city, toward their clan house. She split off with an escort dragging along the two Warpact prisoners, trussed up tightly and gagged, otherwise they tried to bite anyone who came close.

Marta grabbed Stranger's arm and pulled her along quickly, if they stuck to the rear of the group, Laya probably wouldn't notice, and Marta really wanted to see the castle.

Eventually they left the city. That would have disappointed Marta, if the castle wasn't trying so hard to be something out of a tale that Gran would tell by the fire. Just look at it! Up on the hill, vast and powerful, yellow stone giving the impression it was the sun rising out of the sea. She could almost hear Gran telling a story about a group of Champions and their beloveds, living in an enchanted castle, going on forays into the wilds to defeat all manner of mythical beasts.

The state of the path up the hill between the city and castle disappointed her. Nothing grand about it. Just a plain old path, worn with time, two tracks of dirt, dug out by wheels on carts.

On the left side, tall yellow grass, on the right the wide open sea. Her stomach wobbled when she looked at it, so she didn't.

At the top of the hill, with the castle looming, they stopped at the gates, held up by a guard at a small house. He spoke with Laya for a moment. Marta couldn't hear what they said, from the back of the group, she didn't want to be in Laya's eyeline.

A woman hurried around the corner, her steps quiet on the stone, she wore light slippers, very impractical, but that wasn't what made her stand out.

She looked exactly like Laya. Well, like Laya without the expression like she had just sucked on a sour fruit. She must be the Queen, Laya's last sister.

The Queen said something to the guard and he waved the prisoners inside. The rest of the Heilingsson group dispersed, some following the prisoners, some going to different areas in the yard.

Marta found herself alone with Stranger, Laya, and the Queen.

The Queen gestured at them. Laya looked over her shoulder and ate a few sour fruits. She sighed and waved Marta forward.

"This is Marta," the Queen lifted an eyebrow. Laya gestured at Stranger. "And this is...," she hesitated and Marta broke in, "This is Stranger, we found her in the woods and she barely speaks...um, your majesty?"

A bright, tinkling laugh burst out of the Queen. "Well, young Marta," she put out her hands. Marta awkwardly took them, "I'm pleased to meet such a close friend of Egmond's. I would love for you and your friend to stay with us at the castle."

Laya grunted. The Queen ignored her and continued, "Come, we can all have refreshments and talk. You all must be very tired after your trip."

She dropped Marta's hands, and put her on arm Laya's. They walked into the castle together, they hurried to catch up.

Marta couldn't have asked for a better outcome.

Walking down the hallway to the great hall, Egmond could hear the crowd before he saw it. At dinner the previous nights, the hall was full but not anything like this. The crowd was so loud, echoes from the cavernous space couldn't be heard.

A few days ago, he got out of bed feeling refreshed and rested. Truth be told, he'd only spent about a day and a half in bed, but that was an eternity for someone who wasn't exactly ill.

Turning the corner, the wall of noise blasted even stronger. The benches and tables overflowed with men and women, mostly warriors with their leather vests, weapons slung on back, or waist, or resting on the bench beside them like a companion.

By the laughter and shouts, the mood was high, and drunk.

A hand clapped him on the shoulder, breaking him from watching the revelry.

“Leader Heilingsson!”, a voice boomed at the same time.

The voice belonged to a man of average height with a well trimmed brown beard holding a wide grin.

“By your look I see you don’t recognize me,” his face was familiar, but Egmond couldn’t place it. “Wuirthing, of clan Vyoss. Leader of the house. The last time you were in my presence, you were a slip of a boy hiding behind his mothers skirts. Now, here you are, a man fully grown and Leader in his own right.”

That was it. Leader Vyoss was someone who frightened him as a child. A voice so big it shook a room, sometimes in anger, sometimes in laughter. He remembered his mother complaining about this man a few times.

Egmond tried his best to look like a Leader as he reached out to shake the man’s hand. “A pleasure to see you again Leader Vyoss.”

A laugh burst from the man. He clapped Egmond on the shoulder again. “Come, I’ve only just arrived and I am famished.”

Egmond followed him to the head table. As they approached Wuirthing boomed jovially, “Look who I found staring aghast at the thought of my men eating taking all his dinner.”

The head table was crowded tonight. All the usual suspects, the King, his aunt Tani, Henrik, a few more councilors and warriors. They were joined by some men who must be Vyoss high ranking members, and his aunt Laya and oddly, Marta and Stranger, seated down toward the end.

Laya shuffled sideways making space for him between her and Henrik on the crowded bench while Torstin grumbled, “Don’t worry Egmond, I often frown when Wuirthing enters a room too.”

The other clan Leader seated himself and without missing a beat began piling food onto his plate. “If it would make you happier, clan Vyoss has plenty of our own land to defend, we can return home first thing in the morning.” He said it with a smirk.

Torstin grimaced. “Take no offense Wuirthing. I only meant that your face frightens me. Clan Sillum is grateful that clans Heilingsson and Vyoss honor their word.”

For the past few days, Torstin was unwilling to talk about the other clans. Egmond knew the kingdom was on unstable footing, but was surprised to be the first clan to arrive to the summons. He latched onto the chance.

“Have other clans refused outright then?”, he asked while grabbing food. The side conversations instantly went quiet.

Wuirthing broke the tension. “Other you say? I understand now why Hroldan isn’t here chirping in my ear.”

Henrik chimed in. "I'm not sure I want Oronskar men at my back with Warpact at the front anyway."

Torstin said: "When the Warpact come in numbers, you'd take Odeous at your back. Which is why we are so happy that Wuirthing is here now." Raising his cup at Wuirthing, the two men smiled at each other in a way that reminded Egmond of two mountain goat bucks about to smash their heads together.

Laya entered the conversation. "From what I've heard, clan Vyoss hasn't brought as many warriors as one would expect. A clan with prosperous lands and bountiful fishing grounds, has a plague hit your people in recent years?"

Wuirthing chuckled. "Come dear Laya, you cannot expect me to leave my lands undefended with Warpact in our waters."

She persisted. "You believe they will find it easier to navigate the barrier islands this time?"

Wuirthing's face was losing its friendliness. "Warpact ships made it to our waters last time. Battles were fought and my people died as well."

"But not in great numbers."

"Laya," Torstin broke in, "stop. Your king is grateful for clan Vyoss honoring its vows. That is enough."

To Egmond's amazement, Laya sat back and said no more on the subject. There were few people who could command his aunt to silence.

Into the silence Wuirthing said: "With the heroics of Heilingsson warriors last week, I don't even know if you need my warriors anyway." That brought a chorus of banging mugs and "HERE HERE!" from Henrik and other Heilingsson at the table. He continued: "The way I've heard it told, Henrik here slaughtered a boatload of them on his own. I hear he's nearly as frightening on the battlefield as our own King," he raised his mug toward Torstin with a nod.

After the next round of cheers faded, Torstin said: "Actually, today word arrived from Judges. It seems there may be an encampment of Warpact in their hills. They may have been there while your men passed through even. We will have need of Vyoss warriors imminently."

Laya, as if the previous conversation hadn't happened, said: "Warpact in the hills above Judges, Warpact in the hills above Thornvaal. Three sightings now. How many more have gone unseen?"

"Three?", Egmond asked. "What was the third?"

Torstin said: "Your aunt found a small camp even further north than yours. In fact, she has brought us the first two Warpact prisoners we've ever held. At least, in a good enough state to stay alive long."

Laya said: "Actually, the camp was found by those two." She gestured down the table to Marta and Stranger.

The king leaned forward, as if becoming aware of them for the first time. "A child and an outsider?" Marta's face reddened but she held her tongue. Torstin continued: "I wasn't aware that outsiders had

moved to your lands Egmond.” He said it reproachfully, as if Egmond shouldn’t allow that to happen. Truthfully, outsiders were rarely seen that far from the coastal cities and ports. Over the years a few had traveled through, but none had seemed interested in staying.

Marta abruptly chimed in. “She’s my friend. We trust her.” She looked at Egmond forcefully, as if insisting he speak up. He wasn’t sure if he did trust the woman.

Laya said: “You should be grateful for that girl and the outsider. Without them, you’d have a pack of Warpact horsemen wandering your lands unchecked. As it stands, their horses are running around alone now.”

Torstin looked thoughtful, “I would have preferred you brought me horses instead of prisoners.” His eyes seemed glued on Stranger as he spoke.

“The battle went as the battle went,” said Laya. “Send some hunters up there, you’ll find their horses, or you’ll find more Warpact.”

Torstin grunted.

Egmond said: “Those prisoners, did you truly mean that they are the first Warpact prisoners we’ve held?”

“Aye,” Torstin nodded, “they fight like monsters intent on slaughtering everything in front of them. Over the years we’ve held a few prisoners, but they were the ones too badly injured to end their own lives. Not much good to us. I’ve seen Warpact slit the throats of their own people as they retreat from a battle. I look forward to conversations with these two.”

He said that last with a look that raised the hair on Egmond’s neck.

The view from the balcony was otherworldly. Too bad she didn’t want to be here.

It was early morning still, the night spent in the castle wasn’t as grand as she had hoped. Outsiders brought tales of lords and ladies and warriors and grand courts, but here at Thornvaal, the warriors did what warriors back home did every night. They drank. And they sang and told tales. The same old tales they told at Elderglen. Well, here the stories were about different people, but they ended the same. The Champion defeated the monster and came home with riches galore. It was boring. And she didn’t think that was how things really went in real life.

This morning, she woke up and had planned to take Stranger into the city, there were probably enough things to do and see to fill a lifetime.

And then Laya found them and made them come have morning repast with the Queen.

So here they sat, on the Queen’s balcony, the same as yesterday, having the same boring conversations about politics and weather and people back home. Actually it was worse than yesterday. Yesterday at least they asked Marta questions. They started by asking Stranger questions, but that was a dead end.

The woman could only answer in rudimentary words still. Half the time she didn't even understand the question. So then they switched to Marta. Questions about Gran, questions about Egmond, questions about her plans for the future, whether she had a sweetheart, and more!

Come to think of it, maybe she liked it when they talked politics instead.

The Queen said something that made Marta's ears perk up.

"What was that...uh, your majesty?", how do you have conversations with a queen anyway? She kept forgetting to be formal. Thankfully the Queen didn't appear to mind, though Laya was giving her usual stink-eye.

"Dear," the Queen smiled kindly, "I was saying it might have been a blessing if my husband hadn't cleared Torgan-the-Wolf and his bandits out of the woods last season. They were a great source of trouble for us, but they would have given these Warpact problems as well, the forest wouldn't be such a good hiding place."

"And they might have kept Leader Nila safe then." It popped out of her mouth before she knew the thought was there.

Despite the strained look on both faces, neither woman rebuked her.

"Yes dear. They might."

Marta had a nagging sensation. Like a buzz in her head. It was often the start of something that got her into trouble, so she held her tongue this time. But Laya knew her too well.

"Speak it girl," the warrior woman barked, which made Stranger jump.

Marta sighed. "I was wondering how you knew it was Warpact. That...you know..."

"That killed my sister?", the Queen asked, her voice strained for the first time.

Marta nodded.

"Well," the Queen put down her knitting, "we don't generally have murderers running around Sillum lands. Targan's band was quite an outlier, their stories are already being made into legend in the taverns, and I'll admit, the man was honorable, of a kind. He didn't kill anyone he robbed, and mostly struck outsider caravans heading inland. But I meander. Violence is quite uncommon on my husband's lands." She picked up her knitting again. "Plus, Warpact weapons were found near...her body."

"Oh," said Marta. The nag wasn't gone. "Did Nila have weapons?"

The Queen stopped knitting and looked at Laya with pursed lips.

Laya snorted. "I told you about this one didn't I?"

That didn't seem fair. Marta knew she could be...persistent...but there was nothing wrong with the question was there? Well, other than being about their recently murdered sister.

“No dear. She did not have weapons on her.” Tani sighed. “I wish she had.”

“Then why did they kill her? And leave her to be found?”

Laya was watching her with those eyes that made it hard to get away with things. But she wasn’t trying to get away with anything, so she set her lips and kept going.

“I’m only saying. If I were a group of warriors invading a hostile land and didn’t want to be found, the last thing I’d do would be to kill someone and leave behind evidence. After all, those woods are huge aren’t they? They could have put her body anywhere. We might still be looking for her. How was she found?”

Tani leaned back in her chair, setting her knitting on a small table next to her. “A traveler saw her horse by the roadside, grazing. Nila was found nearby in the woods.”

Marta sat up. “Well see? Why leave behind a horse? Obviously we value them higher than outsiders do, but still, that makes no sense. You dump the body deep in the woods and take the horse and you don’t drop weapons where any fool can find them!”

Marta was grinning now. This was at least interesting. This was strange and she loved strange! And then she realized what she was talking about.

Both women looked at her with unreadable expressions. She really needed to think more often.

Stranger watched them, eyes moving between all three faces. The woman barely spoke the language, but she seemed to have a knack for what people meant just by watching what they did.

Laya was first to speak. Calmer than Marta expected.

“What you say holds some sense. Even if said senselessly. Be that as it may, the difference holds little value now does it?”

The Queen added: “Thank you for caring about our sister, but as Laya says, it wouldn’t change much. Nila is gone either way.” Even Marta could read the pain in her eyes now. The Queen leaned forward in her seat. “Now, show us your stitching. Let us see what you have learned.”

Marta wanted to say more. She really wanted to say more. Instead she held up her embroidery. Even Stranger grimaced.

“Well,” said the Queen, “you seem to need more practice. You’ve plenty to learn I’d say?”

Marta nodded. There definitely was plenty to learn. But not about embroidery.

Henrik pulled him aside after breakfast. “I’m going to head into the city. I suspect we might head out any day, I want to pick up some things. Want to join me?”

“Head out? You mean to Judges?”, Egmond was confused. “There hasn’t been a council of Leaders yet. There is only the King, Leader Vyoss, and myself.”

Henrik nodded and smiled. “That isn’t how war works. Things change overnight and we walk. Sometimes we get halfway to our destination and things change and we turn around and go back to where we started.” They walked through the castle hallways as they talked. “There are two rules to being a warrior during war. Be ready to walk, and sleep where and when you can.”

Egmund laughed. “I’ll have to take your word for it. Seems like a waste to march halfway and turn around though.”

Henrik shrugged. “That’s just how it goes.” He laughed. “Actually, we usually complain that kind of thing is the fault of leadership...but now that’s you. You’re welcome to change that.”

Egmund wouldn’t even know where to start something like that. Might as well ask him to have an argument with the Older Ones. Instead he said: “Is there anything I should pick up?”

“Probably.”

On the walk down the hill they figured out Egmund likely needed a new travel pack, a bedroll, and bracers. He realized he had no money, he never needed money, not only was there almost nothing to buy in Elderglen, if he needed something from a clansmen, they squared it up with his parents. Didn’t they? Thankfully, Henrik offered to loan him what he needed.

Their first stop was to a local blacksmith. Henrik left his sword with the man to add a new pommel and crossguard and sharpen it. Egmund came away with a new long knife and belt knife. Both much higher quality than those he had brought. The belt knife came with a sheath and whetstone that fit in a small pocket. The long knife was even longer than his old one, some cast off he found in the clan weapons room. This new knife was nearly as long as his short sword. [todo: Egmund dual-weilds now] Both cost three times what he’d expected, but Henrik insisted they were fair prices at Thornvaal.

After that, Henrik took him to a nearby market. The variety of foods was incredible. They stopped at a stall where an outsider cooked wide, flat cakes on a large piece of metal over a fire. She poured butter directly onto the hot plate, the stuff was liquid, and it spread out, bubbling at the edges. Then a quick flip onto the other side as dried berries were sprinkled onto the cooked side. Finally, a sauce of some kind was poured over the berries before the merchant flipped and folded and plopped the steaming hot cake right into Egmund’s hands. He tossed it back and forth, blowing on his fingers and on the cake. Finally, when it was cooled a little, he bit into it. A whirlwind of flavor hit him, not at all what he expected. The cake was salty and the berries were mouth-puckeringly sour. The sauce was creamy and sweet. It all came together to be the best thing he had ever eaten. He made Henrik go back for a second.

They walked between stalls and ate, the second cake still burning his fingers. Henrik laughed as sauce Egmund bit into it, squirting flaming hot sauce into his face.

“Just wait, later we can try some Sillum fish pie. They have this sauce that will sear your tongue even ice-cold.”, he closed his eyes. “Oh my mouth is watering thinking about it.”

The market was a wonder. Stalls packed so tight, the only way to tell where one ended and the next began

was the different piles of goods. Stalls with brightly colored fabrics bumped up to stalls with woven baskets and stalls with fruits and vegetables, trinkets, hot foods, leather goods, fishing gear. He could buy every thing he could imagine.

As they walked, Henrik said: "This is why I became a warrior. Well not this," holding up his cake at Egmond's confused look. "This," he motioned at the whole market. "I wanted to see the world outside our little village."

Egmond didn't know how to feel about that. His whole world was that village. "I always kind of figured it was because you were such a good fighter."

Henrik's mouth drew thin. "No, that came after. Da wanted me to work the farm, but I saw him and Grandda every day rise before dawn to milk the goats, chop the wood, mend the fences, haul the hay, muck the stalls. A day full of chores that ended at sundown to start again the next day. A life in a day. I knew I'd go mad. Truth be told, when the Warpact invaded, I was glad," he grimaced. "Everyone thought warriors were a dying breed. They still might be," he shrugged. "But not yet. Back then, it was a boon. I took the vows and left the farm, and saw parts of the island I never expected to see."

They walked in silence for a bit. He knew Henrik well enough to know he wasn't happy the Warpact had returned.

"They say you're the greatest Heilingsson warrior since the time of Champions you know?"

Henrik's laugh held no joy. "Not that. I'm a good warrior. Very good. I know it. But only mad men want to brag about being good at killing."

"Sounds like many of the Champions of legend were mad men."

Henrik chuckled. "They probably were. The time of the Older Ones was a time well past."

"I thought warriors respected the Older Ones?", Egmond's own vows were handed down from that time. The ritual at the Stone was as old as their people. Thankfully, the relationship to the Older Ones ended there for a Leader.

"Respect and admiration are not the same thing," Henrik's eyes were on the marketplace, but he was looking through it.

"I don't really understand." Their people's lives were intertwined with rituals and history around the Older Ones, but never with details.

"Have you decided to take the vows of a warrior young Leader?" The sternness of his voice made a lie of the smile on his face. Egmond shook his head. "Then may you never understand."

Henrik clapped him on the shoulder. "Come, I want you to try this fruit from outside the fog. We can take some to Bjorn."

Egmond lost his smile. In all the excitement, Bjorn's injury had slipped his mind. He would have come in

with Laya's group, he was likely at the wounded house or clan house.

Henrik stopped at a stall with piles of fruit. The man behind the stall was fair skinned and short, an outsider. "Have you any sunfruit?"

The merchant's eyes lit up. "Ah! A discerning customer!" His accent was thick and musical, Egmond found himself leaning in to understand the man better. "It happens that I have a few bundles. Came in recently!", he reached under the stall and pulled out a large basket with a lid.

"You are aware of it's ripening, yes? Keep it covered until you are ready to eat it. Put it out in the morning and it will ripen by midday and spoil by that night."

Henrik nodded. "I've had them before."

"Then you'll like not balk at my price!", the merchant laughed and lifted the basket lid slightly, just enough to show the fruit but still shading them from the sun. The fruits were a bright color, a fiery wash that faded between red and yellow. The bulbous centers branched out into wavy, thick arms, the largest of which all gathered in a central cluster.

"You only sell by the cluster?", Henrik asked.

The merchant chuckled. "Yes, large one, They being to ripen when the cluster is broken. Do that and fail to put them in the sun within three days and you'd be a fool whose money I would gladly take. No, I cannot afford to waste them like that."

Henrik grunted. "I'll take one cluster. Your largest, mind."

"Of course, of course." He named an exorbitant price which Henrik paid without hesitation. While the merchant put the fruit in a sac, being careful to keep them out of direct sunlight, he asked: "What part of these grand isles do you young men call home?"

Egmond answered: "We are down from the mountains. Clan Heilingsson."

The merchant's eyebrows rose. "Heilingsson you say? That's the place with those berries right?"

Egmond noticed the man's eyes looked anywhere but at them. Hiding something.

"Don't happen to have any of those on you, do you?" He hesitated, then added: "I'd take them in barter for another bundle of sunfruit."

Egmond looked to Henrik who only raised his eyebrow back.

"We don't really carry the berries around with us. You can buy the wine around somewhere in the city I'm sure."

"Oh I've had the wine. I've had the wine. Even some of that 'festival wine' as you call it. I know that's not so much allowed?", he looked up for a moment as if measuring if he had offended. "That stuff had quite a punch." He handed the sac of sunfruit to Henrik. "But no, it's the berries which hold my interest. I've

a man with a ship who brings me my supply. I could sell those berries around the world if I could find a source. Even sent some messages a few years back to your Leader, but was never honored with a meeting.”

Egmund’s heart sank. But Henrik laughed.

“Ha! Well aren’t you touched by Langothlan today. This young man is the Leader of clan Heilingsson.”

The merchant laughed too. “I’m sure he is. Thank you for the laugh warrior.” Then his smile faded a little. “Your Leader...the warpact killed her months ago...yes?”

“My mother,” Egmund said coldly. “I took the vow of Leadership not a week ago.”

The merchant’s face sunk. “Uh...Leader, I bet your understanding! And I regret speaking of your mother as I have. Your loss was great. News of her death shook Thornvaal. I understand she was a woman of great wisdom.” He was wringing his hands now. Egmund felt for him. He couldn’t have known.

“I understand good merchant. What is your name?”

“Jonwyn, young Leader. I hail from a land known as Syllis. In your language it would be called ‘Deep Sunlight’. I have lived in the land of the clouds for nearly fifteen years.”

“The land of the clouds?”, the man said it like Egmund should know where that was.

Henrik explained. “That is what outsiders call our land. The fog, you see.”

The merchant jumped in, as if trying to move past his previous comments.

“Yes, your fog. It surrounds your land for vast distances into the sea. It is why your people were unknown to the world for so long. It is not a fine and fair sea out there in the fog, which has kept you hidden. Breaking through into the inside so many years ago was like arriving into a different world. Your land is a beautiful place. I have been to your mountains, the heights are unlike anything back in my home...”, he stopped abruptly, as if realizing he was rambling.

What must it be like to see a different world? To pierce the fog and travel unknown seas and see strange lands, to sleep under the light of unfamiliar stars? The merchant’s hands were still grasped tightly in front of him.

“I see,” said Egmund, “maybe one day I will be able to travel to your home.”

A smile broke out on the man’s face. “Perhaps young Leader! Though my home would likely disappoint you. It is a land of sand and dust, but perhaps one day I could show you the Sands of Akami, or the Great White Wastes. Ah!”, his face lit up and he ducked under the booth, coming up with a handful of bright purple fruits the size of a hen’s egg. “Here!”, he dropped them into Egmund and Henrik’s hands. “These are from my home land. They are called stone fruit, bite carefully around the pit in the center. They hold a light flavor but keep for an eternity. Free of charge,” he said the last with a wide grin. “Please, return any time and we can speak of distant lands and near delights.”

Jonwyn’s smile encouraged them to leave, he wanted Egmund to forget the early conversation.

“Thank you Jonwyn,” Egmond said. The merchant truly couldn’t have known. Egmond pocketed the fruit. Bjorn would like to try these as well. If he was well enough to eat that is. Henrik led him through the market toward the wounded house.

[todo: Henrik is in this scene now]

Thornvaal was so bit it had a dedicated house for healing. When someone got injured at Elderglen, they healed at home, half of Healer’s days were spent traveling the countryside checking on people kicked by goats, or scratches from mountain cats, visiting sick children at their family farm.

Once, when he was a child, an illness broke out, and for weeks the main hall of the clan house held cots, the tables pushed back against the walls, but other than that he hadn’t seen so many wounded this close together.

The healing house was one large room, down the center of the building, with small alcoves around the edges. Cots lay in straight rows, six wide, the foot of one bed a few feet from the head of the next. The building was easily twice the size of Heilingsson’s clan house.

At either end of the building, large doors, wide enough for a cart, opened onto courtyards whose walls were high enough to hide most of the buildings around. Supposedly the sea breeze was good for healing, which would be news to Healer, who often preached the importance of mountain air to a sick or injured person.

Through those doors, the distant sound of crashing waves broke through the noise of the city. The healing house was on the outskirts, not far from the beach.

Few beds were unoccupied. Egmond walked past people with bandages wrapping heads, others with stumps covered, some bloodier than others. One whole section held people coughing, some slept, some had visitors, healers rushed past constantly, always with purpose.

How many people did clan Sillum have to have so many sick and wounded and still the city outside was non-stop bustling crowds? How many warriors must have died that Heilingsson’s small numbers were a boon?

“Egmond!”, croaked a voice. Bjorn held his arm up, waving at Egmond from a few rows away. His left arm. The right arm was a ball of bandages.

Bjorn saw where Egmond’s eyes went as he walked up. He held up his boandaged arm and said: “They say I lost it, but who can tell behind this gigantic thing?”, there was humor in his voice but Egmond knew him too well. It was a face he’d been reading lies on since they were barely off their mother’s skirt-strings.

“Does it hurt?” What a stupid question. “I’m sorry, Bjorn.”

The smile broke a little. Only a little though. “For what? I knew I’d be a warrior as long as I could remember.”

Egmund tried to match Bjorn's smile then thought better of it. Bjorn knew him too well, and hated being lied to.

"I could have had more scouts, or kept us on high alert...", he trailed off. Bjorn was making a face that said, 'no you couldn't'.

"No offense Egmund, but you aren't a warrior. They'll respect you as Leader, but they'll do what they do."

Bjorn pushed himself up in bed and winced in pain, pulling his right arm to his chest. "I keep forgetting." His stupid grin returned. "Sometimes I swear I can feel my fingers twitching."

He held up the arm in what could have been a rude gesture. "Quick, which finger am I holding up?"

A cough behind Egmund meant he didn't have to pretend to find the joke funny.

Petr stood there. Bjorn's father.

He reached past Egmund to drop a pillow on the bed.

"One of the healers said a baker a few streets over makes passable biscus cakes, I'm off to get you some." He turned to Egmund and said: "Leader" and walked away.

As Egmund watched him leave, Bjorn said: "Don't mind him. I think he's secretly excited, thinks I'll become a cooper after all. Keeps mentioning Illya off-hand, like I'll up and start a family tomorrow."

"Did the healers say when you can go back?"

Bjorn's face was a mask of confusion. "Why would I go back?"

Now it was Egmund's turn to be confused. Bjorn went on.

"I'm a warrior now Egmund. There are things a warrior can do, even with one hand."

Egmund couldn't stand the thought of Bjorn in a battle again, but he felt the weight of his own vows.

"You won't fight for a while though right?"

"Depends on the Warpact doesn't it?"

Into the silence that followed, Bjorn held up his bandaged arm again. "Think Laya will like me now?! We can be twins!"

Egmund laughed. "No, you are decidedly too chipper for her taste."

He caught a familiar figure out of the corner of his eye. Leader Vyoss.

Wishing Bjorn well and promising he'd return, he hurried to catch up to the clan leader.

"Leader Vyoss!", he called out and the man turned.

"Egmund. Come now, I told you last night to call me Wuirthing. We are equals now. Your father was always too formal too. Have you wounded here?"

“I’ve only found one so far.”

“Yes, it’s a bit of a mess here isn’t it?” he waved around vaguely. “Vyoss clan house has a section for wounded, we brought our own healers. Not that we don’t appreciate clan Sillum hospitality, but as you can see, it’s a bit crowded here.”

“Our healer arrived with Bjorn, a few days after me. I suppose she’s here somewhere?” he looked around and saw no familiar faces.

“Only one? The air up in the mountains must be very healthy”, Wuirthing smiled. “Don’t fret over it too much. We have been here long enough. I got one sight of this overcrowded place and knew my warriors needed better.”

He gestured at the large open room. “Let’s walk, maybe you will find some more of your people.”

“It can be overwhelming when you are first a Leader yes? So many responsibilities, things to think about, questions to answer.” He waved appeasingly when Egmond’s face soured. “I mean no offense. I came to it young as well. But not so young as you. I had years of training behind me. At a clan the size of Vyoss, it was necessary.”

Egmond wasn’t sure what to say to this. His mother hadn’t explained most of the responsibilities he was finding himself with.

Wuirthing broke the silence: “They called him the Kingmaker, did you know that?”

“Excuse me? Who?”

“Your father. He’s known as the Kingmaker in the clans in the north. That’s probably why he was always so formal with me”, he smiled. “he was great friends with Torstin. They had to be brothers in a previous life. He always favored Torstin over others. And he had a silver tongue. Without your father, we might all still be fighting each other instead of the Warpact. His death seemed to have burned the idea into your mother. I’m sure your aunt is helping out with matters yes? Laya that is.”

“Well, yes she has been acting as my advisor.”

“Good. A smart woman, she will advise you well”, he tipped his head as if Laya was there. “You’ll want more than one advisor though may I suggest. It’s good to have a few opinions, let them argue amongst themselves, sort the best ideas out. Some of your peers wouldn’t hurt. An advisor who has been loyal to you for a long time is a handy thing to have.”

They walked in silence for a beat before Wuirthing continued.

“You know, when this is all over, I had been thinking. It would be a good idea to establish a more consistent exchange of messages over the mountain passes between our clans. One thing these Warpact have shown is that it would be wise of us to not depend on passage through Sillum for Vyoss and Heilingsson to be in touch. Maybe some trade. Our waters are richer than Sillum, I would gladly trade some of our bounty for Heilingsson wine. Everyone knows it is the most potent”, he clapped Egmond on the shoulder.

“Do you think the southern clans will be run over?”

Wuirthing seemed taken aback. “I hadn’t meant to imply as much. But it is wise of you to think like that. The Warpact have rarely made it above the Spine to our Northern waters. For some gods-forsaken reason they concentrate here at Sillum, especially the Southernmost point. Every attack they whittle away. This was the same tactic they used last time and it nearly worked. It’s only a matter of time. I would hate for Heilingsson and Oronskar to be cut off from the rest of us.”

Egmund hesitantly asked: “But surely that’s all the more reason to support Sillum isn’t it? If Sillum falls, we’re back to warring tribes instead of Kingdom and the Warpact will overrun us all.”

“Lad”, Wuirthing sighed heavily, “this ‘kingdom’ was destined to fall the moment your father passed. As long as we’ve existed we’ve fought each other. It’s the way of things. This idea of making us one against the world was your fathers. I respected him and I saw value in peace. But Torstin was never going to hold us together forever. The idea of a shared land comes from outside the fog.” He stopped and put his hand on Egmund’s shoulder. “But peace is valuable. And I would like to see Heilingsson and Vyoss working together to earn that peace.”

“My uncle...the King...he drove them away last time. Why do you think he won’t this time?”

Wuirthing started walking again. “You were young last time. It was different. Back then, Torstin was driven by something inside him. He was a terror on the battlefield, a warrior of legend, truth be told. But he isn’t young anymore. He also doesn’t have your father’s brain anymore. To Torstin, every battle is solved the same way. The only way he knows, brutality and force.” He looked sideways at Egmund. “If Torstin was a better leader, your father might still be here to advise him.”

He let that hang in the air.

They had walked to the other end of the wounded house, Egmund had seen a few familiar faces on the way. Wuirthing turned and gestured to the exit. “I must go, duties to attend, you understand. If you want to talk about your parents or need advice, find me any time Egmund. I’ll leave you to finding your clan members.” With that he turned and strode away.

He went looking for Laya and found her with the Queen on her favorite balcony.

Tani got up from her chair as soon as he came into the room. Her face was red.

“Egmund, darling, come. Sit with us and reminisce.” She grabbed his hand and pulled without waiting for an answer. He resisted at first, until her stern voice came out. “Young man, you will join us.”

“You can’t call him ‘young man’ now Tani,” Laya said while Tani settled back into her seat, Egmund sat on a bench against the balcony. Looking at the ocean made him feel queasy.

Tani’s face took on a faux haughty chill. “He may lead a clan now”, her chin went up, “but I am his Queen. And his aunt. And I would wager you haven’t held your tongue in deference a time or two.”

Egmund laughed. “She would do that with any Leader.”

Tani joined his laugh with her own bright voice. “Your mother used to say Laya would sass the Older Ones. That she was old the day we were born.”

To his surprise, Laya chuckled. Not many people could mock her without a lash from her tongue.

Their laughter slowed to a wistful silence.

Laya said into the pause, “You look like her you know.”

“Then I look like both of you.” He couldn’t think about her this much.

“Maybe a version of me that’s seen less of sun and blade.”

Tani broke the mood. “Pray to the Older Ones he doesn’t live a life at the blade.”

Did he care about that? Laya was strong and respected. She could have been his steward as Leader for a few years and the clan would have had her in a heartbeat. Some would complain, but not many.

“I would be proud to be a warrior half as good as Laya.”

“If you were only half as good, there would be even less of you.” She held up her stubbed hand. “But I think what your aunt means, is that she’d like to see you live a life without war.”

Tani nodded. “We would both like to see you live the life your parents and my husband worked toward so hard.”

“You can talk to the Warpact about that,” he said.

“Torstin tried that you know,” Tani said. “Talking to them. When you were young and they first came here. He took your fathers advice and sent people to their ships under a flag of truce. They slaughtered the messengers.” The grim face was foreign on her. “We’ve never tried again.”

“Why do they hate us so much?”

“We have no idea,” Laya said.

“Bazinaat says they are known around the world as raiders, up until around a hundred years ago.”

“What’s a ‘bazinaat’?”, Egmund asked.

“‘Who’, not ‘what’,” she got up and walked to a desk. Picking up a thick rectangular box, she placed it in his lap. She opened the lid, a thin piece of wood, and folded parchments unfolded with it, each covered in tiny lines and curves. Writing in an unrecognizable script.

“Bazinaat is my dear friend from outside the fog.” She sat back down. “She is known in the lands outside as one who writes down stories and tales. Something like a Lorekeeper but written down and shared with others like this,” gesturing at the box. “She says the Warpact were ocean raiders, covering much of the known world. They appeared in everyone’s tales around the same time, hundreds of years ago. Raiding

and killing and taking no prisoners. That is where their name comes from. In the outside they are called something like ‘Those who make perpetual conflict’. We translate that to ‘Warpact’. They actually call themselves ‘The People of the Clouds’. Then around a hundred years ago, they settled into a land of sand and heat and ignored the rest of the world.”

He flipped through the pages. “Where does she say that? Can you read this?”

“Not much of it. It’s written in a script known in many lands. Not in ours of course, but Bazinaat has been trying to teach me for years.”

“Does she say why they hate us though?”

“She speculates.”, adjusting her skirts, “She wonders if they have some religious reason. Or maybe that they had grown tired of raiding others until our new land enticed them to the ocean again.

“But they don’t just raid us, do they?”, Egmond asked.

Tani shrugged. “She doesn’t say. She hasn’t visited in a while, and now that the Warpact are attacking again...”, she shrugged.

Chapter 10

“Good Egmond! Tighter! Keep the post at your back!”, Henrik swung his stick again, this time in an arc downward, challenging Egmond’s space in front of a large post, a practice dummy covered in stick arms and legs. Egmond’s job was to keep Henrik from touching the post with his stick. He dripped with sweat and itched with sand. Henrik had sent Egmond to the dirt multiple times already.

The stick swun again, cracking against Egmond’s arm.

“Soros’ ghost!”, that one stung.

“You’re too rigid!”, Henrik’s stick struck Egmond’s knee, causing him to stumble. Henrik shoved him in the back, sending Egmond to the dirt again, and struck the post casually then thwacked Egmond on the back again.

“You’re dead and so is your charge.”, the older man sighed. “Let’s take a break.”

He walked over to a barrel against the wall and took a long drink from the dipper while Egmond sat up, dejected and exhausted.

Other warriors around the practice yard went through their own drills. A few sat on benches along the wall of the large space, watching the fights. At least one pair watched Egmond, the taller of the two said something to his companion, who barked a laugh. Both men got up, one shaking his head. They started their own practice bout, trading blows, moving with power and grace. Moving with deadly intent. Moving like warriors, in ways Egmond couldn’t.

He sighed. He shouldn’t be in this place. Had he not been a Leader, he wouldn’t be allowed.

Blowing out through his lips, he pulled himself to his feet and plopped his aching body onto a bench near the water barrel. Even sitting hurt now. Henrik took another dipper-full for himself, refilled it and brought it to Egmond who took it and drank.

Henrik joined him on the bench. "How are you feeling?", Henrik eyed Egmond without facing him, his mouth tight.

"I hurt." Everywhere.

"You're supposed to avoid the stick.", Henrik's dry tone betrayed the joke. He didn't wait for Egmond to laugh. Not that Egmond felt like it. "I saw you during the fight with the Warpact, you know?"

"What? While you were fighting? I couldn't keep track of what was in front of me."

Henrik nodded. "You fought well. For a man in his first battle? His life on the line? You fought well. Very well." He leaned back against the stone wall. "What was different?"

What was different? He meant: 'Why are you pathetic right now?' Egmond could see it in the stillness in Henrik's eyes. Henrik wasn't looking at him still. Since Egmond's youth, Henrik was the older brother he didn't have. He could sense Henrik's confusion.

"I don't know what was different. The attack was so abrupt, I never had time to think, I just reacted. It was almost easy."

Henrik looked at him finally, appraisingly. "That isn't uncommon, though in my experience, the difference is never this marked." He laughed quietly, slapping Egmond on the shoulder. "In this ring, I could beat you senseless with ease."

"Please don't."

"Then you need more practice, get up." Henrik stood and picked up his stick, twirling it. Egmond groaned, but he got up and followed Henrik back to the post.

[todo: rewrite this in 3rd person]

I am determined. Standing, I pick up my stick, feeling its weight, swinging it once to get its balance in my muscles. The post watches me walk up, both of us dreading the outcome.

Henrik asks me, "Ready?"

I'm not. Doesn't matter. I have to be. I nod, and before I ready my stance, he has rapped my knuckles. I hiss, dropping my stick. I dive for it while swatting at his arm, but it's like slapping stone, though I do keep him off the post for a second longer, but only that second.

He backs away, the wood of the post ringing the air, giving me time to set myself, unlike the first time.

As soon as my stance is ready, he dodges to the side, moving like a willow. A man made of stone moving like the wind. I'm ready for him, I dodge back. Not the most heroic option, leaving the post open, but it's a ploy. I want him to go for it, I'll be ready to step in when..too late, his stab is faster than I can react to.

Sighing, he steps back again and waits for me to set again. Impatiently. I can see it in his shoulders. He isn't enjoying this and I'm the reason why. But he does return.

This time I decide to be proactive, swinging for his head. The move catches him by surprise, enough that he has to deflect me, once, twice, on the third as I swing from the side, he is faster. He knew what I was doing. His stick smashes into my chin and I see lights, then sand, the grit grinding my teeth.

Henrik didn't even bother with the post this time. He sits on his haunches, watching me.

I try to stand and the world shifts under me, but I keep my feet and set myself. He shakes his head.

"Let's take a break," he says.

"We just took one."

"You took a hit to the head. You need to take a minute."

I shake my head, the world only shakes a little extra. "Let's go."

He shakes his head back.

I bark, louder than I intend, "Let's go!"

He hasn't even left his crouch, still shaking his head. It pisses me off.

I rush him, swinging wildly, truly surprising him this time, my attack making contact with his shoulder then arm then chest as he springs to his feet, grabbing my weapon. I let go and pummel him, yelling, my wild swipes landing more hits, I bet some of them hurt. But even this, even attacking like a crazed animal isn't enough.

We're grappling on the ground now, over as quickly as it started, my face full of sand with Henrik on my back.

"Do you know why she wanted us to meet her?", Egmond asked.

He paced in the roadway. Early that morning, a messenger handed him a note from Laya. His aunt Tani had received one as well. Tani sat lightly on a stone bench just off the path. They waited at ??? at the entrance to the city on the road down the hill from the castle.

"Did you have somewhere else to be?", she asked with a twinkle in her voice.

"I feel like I should be talking with the King and planning for war."

"There will be plenty of time for that in the coming weeks and months Leader Heilingsson," a glint in her eye spoiled her formality.

He sighed and sat next to her on the bench. The roadway was crowded anyway. Not that the bench was much better. The people of Thornvaal knew their Queen. They seemed to love her. And she loved them

back. Children that waved always got a smile in return. Fishwives who blushed in her presence got an encouraging word and hand on arm, the familiarity disarming and removing their nerves. At Elderglen, no one fawned over him. Or anyone in charge. If anything, leadership got you a sharper side of someone's tongue.

But Tani was the first Queen of their land, the mark of a change in something they knew back to the beginning of stories. They were not a people to join together, to make friends of another clan. Now the stories said time had changed them. Fewer and fewer lived to fight neighbor, until friendship was a better option. And then the outside world found them, and their stories grew and absorbed what they learned. Then the Warpact came. They remembered how to fight, but only so many warriors remained in a world gone to friendship. The Warpact almost settled in. But then Torstin came to battle.

And when the last of the Warpact ships fled into the fog, his aunt married the newly crowned King.

It did not seem to matter to these people that she wasn't of their clan. That shouldn't have surprised him. The city was alive with people of many clans. Even people from the world outside the fog. In the mountains, visitors from the outside were rare. Before the Warpact, a few traders had been coming to Elderglen, but they were none since he was a small boy.

Laya came out of the crowd, waving when she saw them. "I've made you wait," she said as she walked up.

Tani got up from the bench and hugged her. "Nonsense," she smiled.

"What's that?" Egmond asked. Laya carried a small bunch of flowers and a packet.

She looked at the items in her hands and said, "The reason I took so long. I thought I'd find them in the market. I had to hunt down a seer."

Tani nodded, "The burial rituals here involve boats in the sea and fish offerings."

"Burial rituals?", asked Egmond. They hadn't warned him about this.

"Yes dear," said Tani. "We are going to remember your parents. In fact," she looked up at the castle, "I know just the spot", turning to Laya she asked, "Unless you had somewhere in mind?"

"I was going to ask your advice on that."

"Perfect. Come with me." She turned up the road back up the hill, the crowd clearing space for her. Laya followed immediately and snapped at Egmond, "Come on!" when he hesitated.

The road up to the castle followed the curves of the hill. Yellow grasses flanking it on both sides, waving them gently on their way. As it curved around toward the ocean, three-quarters of the way up, a smaller path branched off downhill to a beach of white sand and another small path left the grasses toward rocky outcrops overlooking the beach.

Tani took them up the rocky path in silence. There wasn't much to say. He wasn't ready for this.

The rocky path disappeared but Tani kept going, over stone, under outcrop, always upwards. Egmond

gave a hand to Tani at a few spots, boosting or pulling her onto large rocks she directed him to. He knew enough not to offer the same help to Laya. She only needed one hand to smack him with.

The last climb, he found handholds carved into the rock, slick with moss, but helpful still.

At the top, Tani said: "This is it." She said it quietly, as if afraid to disturb something or someone. At her gesture, Egmond turned around.

They stood on a wide shelf of rock, a sheer cliff behind and in front of them. Hundreds of feet below, waves crashed against the cliff face. The ocean below moved like the grasses above, but green instead of yellow, topped with white foam instead of feathery fluff. Its undulations pulled at him, his legs wanted to move with them. He was fine with heights, he grew up in the mountains, but the views from on high were not meant to move and shift.

His eyes rose to the fog in the distance. That ever-present wall of a hundred colors of gray. The barrier that had so long separated their land from the rest of the world. That impenetrable mystery that no longer kept them safe.

Laya interrupted his thoughts. "Well this is a safety nightmare." She pointed at the cliff behind them. Above actually.

Egmond's eyes followed her finger. The castle loomed above them, barely sixty feet away, set slightly back from the cliff edge.

Egmond barked a laugh. "You would have to be very determined to get a force up here."

Laya pinched her lips, "Determination can do amazing things. Besides, it needn't be a whole force. Isn't that the balcony you love so much Tani?"

"It is. And one reason I love it, is the view over the ocean and the city docks at the same time. If someone were climbing here, they'd have to do it at night and in complete darkness. I don't think that is a climb anyone would take lightly, and they would be a wonder of a climber."

By the look on Laya's face, she wasn't appeased, but she didn't push further.

Egmond asked, "Where did the handholds back there come from?"

"This used to be part of a pathway to the water blow. There is a shrine to Yata, the tide hides it right now. You can still get to it by boat, but I don't think anyone uses it anymore." She gestured to the ledge behind. "Come, sit."

The ledge was deep enough to comfortably walk around. Tani led them to the back wall and sat, leaning against the rock. The cliff above pushed outward. Egmond sat next to her. This far back on the ledge, the world disappeared. Only rock, ocean and fog existed.

Laya didn't sit immediately. Unwrapping her packet, she lay the dried flowers on the ground, then unwrapped a small bundle of incense. Next came a box with a lid. When she opened it, inside a smouldering

coal sat in sand. Blowing on the coal, she touched the incense to its glow.

A deep scent of home washed over him. He didn't know what the incense was, but he recognized it as something his mother burned often. Laya stuck the sticks in small holes in the box and set it on the ground. The packet unraveled further, revealing a small jug of cloudberry wine and some fresh cloudberry, then a pastry and other fruits, all his mother's favorites.

The packet empty now, she set the linen aside and knelt next to the box. Closing her eyes, she pulled the smoke over herself saying, "May the Protector find you in the night. May she pull you from the dark and bind you, in safety, one with her. Keeping you. May you find peace."

Egmund was aware of the pendant on his chest, chain around his neck. Aware of invoking its namesake, afraid of awareness going in both directions. Those were tales for frightened children though. He forced himself to move forward, kneeling next to Laya and closed his eyes, pulling the smoke onto his head. The smells of his mother covered him, enveloping his senses, stinging his eyes, bringing tears.

Tani saved him from embarrassing himself.

"Nila loved this place. She came here at least once every time she'd visit." There were quiet tears on her cheeks. "She didn't get to come that last time. We were planning on it. And the chance didn't come."

She stayed against the cliff face, unfocused eyes staring into the distance. Next to him, by the incense, Laya leaned into him, shaking with silent sobs. Egmund awkwardly put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulders.

They sat in silence for a time, the world faded away, the fog and waves and smells blending into its own existence.

Torstin sat in the head chair at the table. Egmund wandered the halls of the castle alone early morning, taking him into a large room at the end of a quiet hallway high in a tower and had been surprised to find his uncle alone, seated at a large round table, staring through an opening in the wall easily nine feet wide and three tall, overlooking the sea and fog.

"Com in boy, come in", Torstin didn't rise from his chair or really look away from the view, waving Egmund to a chair he pulled out. "Sit, you've caught me in a moment of thought, but you are welcome."

Egmund sat, the chair turned away from the table, facing the large window like Torstin's.

Torstin gestured at the sea. "Quite the sight eh?"

Egmund took it in. It really was. The sea today was covered in foamy waves, the green depths churned by a high wind. But the view was clear for miles, the fog wall in the distance like an impossibly tall mountain range.

"The fog looks different here. We can see it from the mountains, did you know that?"

Torstin turned toward him. "I didn't. What is the difference."

"Only on clear days mind. Up there it looks like...well, the sea. A vast gray sea with waves and peaks. Down here, it's got an anger in it. Always moving, shifting. Less benign."

The king laughed. "It's been ages since we've had a poet Leader, but you just might be one."

Egmund scoffed, "I'll never be a poet. I hope to be a true Leader one day."

"Nonsense lad. You've taken the vow. You are the rightful Leader of Heilingsson."

Was he though? To date all he had done was watch others make choices and the clan operated on its own. Torstin's eyes were on him. As if he could read Egmund's thoughts he said: "You brought your clan to me when called. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to have a trusted ally by my side.", he clapped Egmund on the shoulder.

"I was just doing my duty."

"Is that not what Leadership is? Besides," Torstin's face darkened, "not all Leaders consider answering my call their duty. And," he held up a finger, "you have led your warrirs in battle. While the Warpact invade, that is the most important thing a Leader can do."

They'd be caught by surprise and won through superior numbers. It had absolutely nothing to do with him. But the king didn't want to keep hearing about his failures. "You know they say Henrik might be your equal in battle," Egmund smiled, "maybe legends will tell of him this time."

Torstin didn't laugh. If anything, his already somber face went deeper, and his eyes drifted back to the sea, unfocused. Somewhere else.

"Good. Legends are a curse my boy. And I need every legendary warrior the Older Ones can provide."

A voice behind them broke in. "Now more than ever."

Wuirthing stood in the door. "Word has arrived from Judges. They are officially asking for warriors. It's more than a rumor now Torstin."

"Damn the fools!", Torstin slammed a fist on the table. "The last thing I needed", he growled. "If we survive this I'm making them go back to the days of holding their own fighting force."

Wuirthing walked all the way into the room and pulled out a chair opposite them, its wooden legs clattering on the stone floor. He sat, leaning back and kicking his feet on the table. "Well, here we are. The gathered council. Let us confer with our king." His smile held glee. "What say you majesty?"

Torstin's eye simmered. "What did the messenger say?"

"Only that an unknown force has entrenched on their land, inland mind, and that every man sent to investigate has failed to return."

Torstin smacked the table again. “Curse Hroldan!” He pointed at Wuirthing, “And curse you Northerners. I can’t defend my own coastline with what I have. I need more warriors!”

Wuirthing spread his arms as if to reiterate his presence. Something was off about this. Egmond broke in.

“It can’t be too large of a force, they probably lucked their way past the Barrier Islands, maybe even wrecked a ship and washed up on Judges coast?”

“They found their way north last time,” said Wuirthing. “Enough to keep my people occupied.”

Torstin growled.

Unexpectedly Wuirthing snapped at him. “Let it lie! We have both lost much to these dogs!”, he calmed down a little. “I am here. My warriors are here. More than I left at home, I’ll have you know.” Strangely, his abrupt rant had stolen the thunder from the king’s face. To Egmond, Wuirthing said: “I wouldn’t put it past them to have a larger force than expected. They were much more straightforward last time. Boats out of nowhere, attacking our coastal settlements like avenging spirits, bent on wiping us from this existence, and then they just kept coming. These sneaky tactics are unbecoming of warriors but were the warpact ever men?! Fah!”, his voice rose louder as he spoke, until he ended with a table slap of his own.

The angry silence held, with Torstin watching Wuirthing and Wuirthing watching Torstin and Egmond watching them both. Finally Egmond broke it. “Ok, let’s say they have a large force. How many could they bring on a ship? How many ships? Those waters are dangerous, our people void them. It couldn’t be more than a few hundred right?”

Wuirthing considered. “I’ve seen them dump a few hundred from one ship. Pouring out of every crevice like vermin out of a mass grave. Let’s say a thousand strong. Between Heilingsson and Vyoss we could take an overwhelming force. Three? Four thousand?” He looked at Torstin. “You wouldn’t even need to dirty your hands.”

Torstin’s anger had cooled. “Sillum won’t balk at a fight. Five-thousand strong. We go by coast, as close as we can, if the bastards are hiding in my land too, we’ll have a little fun along the way.” He looked out to the sea through the large window. “That will leave enough of a force to protect Thornvaal from all but a full-on invasion by the entire nation of Warpact dogs. Ready your warriors. We leave in two days.”

He turned his chair fully toward the sea, shutting them out. It was clear he was done talking.

Marta found him on a balcony overlooking the sea. Her shadow had become Stranger.

The balcony was wide, with a stone balustrade. It was a view of infinity out into the distant fog.

She leaned on the balustrade with him, quiet for a moment. Then: “Do you think this is what our ruins used to look like? Well not exactly like this, obviously we don’t have a sea to look over, and maybe not quite as big, there isn’t so much open space in the mountains, but you know what I mean right? The ruins up by Hawk’s Point? They look like this kind of stone, weathered obviously, the moss doesn’t help the

color, but I wonder if all the stone came from the same place, they say there are caves even higher up in the mountains, did you know that? I wonder if the stone came from up there.”

He grinned at her. “Like an avalanche.”

“What?”, she looked confused. “You think an avalanche brought a different kind of stone down the mountains and people built this castle with it?”

He laughed. “No. You. You’re like an avalanche.”

His eyes landed on Stranger looking out over the sea and his laughter slowed.

“Have you learned anything else about her?”

“Well she doesn’t insult me, I learned that.”, she said. “But no, I haven’t. She doesn’t really talk. I’ve taught her a few words and I can sort of understand what she is trying to say when she tries to say something, but she doesn’t try to say much”, she looked thoughtfully at Stranger who didn’t notice. “She mostly just follows me around like she’s tied to my apron, watching everything with wide eyes.”

“Do you think she’s listening? For example, if I said we should kill her?”, he watched Stranger’s face. There was no sign she understood.

“I think she’s listening. She’s paying attention. But I don’t think she means us harm”, she considered the smaller woman. “I think she watches and listens like I probably would if I woke up in the middle of a wolf den.”

“If she’s not our enemy what does she need to fear?”

“Pffft”, Marta snorted. “Spoken like someone who has never face a bigger threat. Look at her! She would have to stand on my shoulders to see the top of your head.”

The crashing waves punctuated her words.

Eventually Egmond said: “Speaking of threats. We might be leaving already. The Warpact have an encampment up at Judges. Seems they’ve been sneaking in small groups inland for some time.”

“Like the camp we found! They’re probably doing the same here.”

“I said that to the King. He didn’t seem too worried about a threat to Thornvaal.”

“Well I think he’s a fool.”

“Ha! The great warrior Marta, to challenge the wisdom of greatest warrior we’ve ever seen”, he rubbed her head roughly. “You’re clever Marta, but war is something else.”

She ducked away from his hand. “I didn’t say I was a great warrior. But I don’t think you need to be a warrior to think. When do we leave for Judges?”

Surprised he said: “You don’t need to go. You’ll stay here, with Stranger and our people. There is plenty to take care of here”, leaning against the balustrade again. “We’ve our own wounded to tend, the clan

house in the city will have plenty of mending and fetching to be done. Anyway, don't you want to see Thornvaal for yourself? There are traders and merchants and goods you've never seen. And did I tell you Thornvaal has horses in the stable?"

That got her attention. "Horses! How many? Where are they? What do they use them for? Can I go see them? What are they called?"

Chuckling he said: "I don't know anything more than that. Torstin said he would send messengers into the woods on horseback to look for Warpact. He's not a fool. He just doesn't think they'll be a threat to Thornvaal before we can find and uproot them. I'm sure if you ask around, someone will tell you where the horses are kept."

"Well I'm glad you think he's not a fool", she said smugly, "I will withhold judgement until I see his horses."

Egmund smiled. He looked out again at the sea, another beautiful day. The sun shone brightly, as it seemed to do often at Thornvaal. The distances visible from this height were vast. It reminded him of looking out from the peaks. Small changes in the lands height became flattened, large hills became waves. And the distance faded into a gray haze. Except here, the distance faded into a gray wall. The fog wall that surrounded their island. A hard edge made of fog, a break in the sun glinting off the sea. A wall that no longer kept invaders out. Their name for themselves was apt.

"The people of the clouds," he murmured to himself.

"What?", Marta asked.

"I was just thinking about something I learned the other day", he turned to her. "The Warpact, they call themselves 'The People of the Clouds' ", he gestured at the fog in the distance. "It's fitting, they come out of the clouds."

Her brow furrowed. "How do you know that?"

"My aunt Tani. She knows a...Lorekeeper? From outside. Named Bazinaat. The outside world calls them Warpact, or close enough, but they call themselves 'The People of the Clouds'."

Her brow furrowed further.

"What?", he asked.

She shook her head, as if trying to shake off a buzzing fly in her ear, then did it again, finally she exclaimed: "Kolos!"

"Huh?"

"Kolos! Do you know Kolos? The final Champion of Yata? You know Kolos right?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Ugh! It was one of the stories Gran tried to make me learn, when she thought I'd follow her as a Lorekeeper. Here, listen," she stood up straight and closed her eyes. Slowly, she put her hand to her chest and took a

deep breath. Then she started thumping out a rhythm. One. One-two. One. One-Two. One-two-three, one-two-three. One. One-two.

Abruptly she spoke, not quite keeping with the rhythm, discordant yet natural.

“The great Kolos. Warrior of great renown. He who champions YaTa! She of protection. She of power.”

She was speaking in light chant, stressing words differently.

Light chant was only used during storytelling around a fire normally. Something only children and old people paid attention to, not like the more exciting warrior tales told in regular speech. It somehow fit here, the crashing sea in the distance, the fog wall muting the world. Marta went on.

“Oh YaTa we beseech thee! Hold Kolos to yourself. Bring him to your power. Through him, protect us from you. For you, oh YaTa have forsaken us to the All. For you, oh YaTa are incomplete. For you, oh YaTa cannot be whole. Oh YaTa, the All consumes. Oh YaTa, the All feeds.

Oh you, oh YaTa, only you oh YaTa can power your champion, the great Kolos, to fight the All, to hold back the All, to hold back the consumption of all.

The great Kolos, greatest of your warriors, goes forth, oh YaTa, beyond the nothing, into the nothing, to seek you oh YaTa, to find you oh YaTa, to make you whole to make you complete to return us to your protection, to bring us home to the clouds oh YaTa...”

She trailed off, thumping out a few more beats then pulled her hand away before opening her eyes. “See?! It goes on like that for quite a while. I don’t remember most of it, but that’s the beginning.”

“Uh...not really.”

“You are helpless sometimes aren’t you?”, she rolled her eyes. “The people of the clouds? The last line I said? ‘Bring us home to the clouds...’?”

“‘Bring us home to the clouds...’, you think the chant is about the Warpact?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember what the rest of the story is, but that sure is weird right? Kolos was the last Champion of Yata, and he was going to...somewhere, and he wanted to return *home* to the *clouds*.”

“Wait, that chant was Kolos talking?”

“Yeah, light chant is like that. I wish I could remember the rest of the story”, she slumped against the balcony.

[todo: how the fuck do I end this scene?]

Chapter 11

Excitedly, she dragged Stranger down the hallway.

“I can’t wait for you to see this. I’ve seen them a few times in my life, but always with a merchant or some messenger. I found out where they were this morning and couldn’t wait to bring you to see them.”

They popped around a corner right into the stables. More pens than she had expected, but most of them full of donkeys or tools. But at the far end, closer to the big doors was ten stalls with horses. They were magnificent. Like a donkey mixed with a wave and mountain.

“Now we mustn’t rush up on them, they can be skittish animals. We need to move slowly, and keep our voices calm, even though this is incredibly exciting. We need to make sure they know we aren’t here to hurt them”, she said all this while slinking down the aisle toward the horse stalls.

Up close they were almost overwhelming. An animal this big. The only other animals on Norselike this big were bears and she hadn’t ever been near one of them. Or seen one. The horses were all muscle and smoothness. Long manes and swishing tails. Big teeth too. And so tall, how did anyone climb up there easily to ride them?

While she stared wonderingly at the horses, Stranger walked up and patted one on the chest. Just like it wasn’t three times as tall as her. Then she grabbed a handful of oats and *let the horse eat out of her hand!*

“Hey! Who are you! Get away!”, a stablehand walked in carrying a bucket and pitchfork and waved angrily at them. “You can’t be near the horses! Who are you?”

Marta jumped. “Oh! I’m sorry but I just love to look at them, they’re such majestic animals and so powerful and sleek. I heard they were down here in the stables and I’ve never seen one so close and I just wanted to see them. We’re staying in the castle with Leader Heilingsson and I thought it would be ok.”

This speech seemed to calm him down a little. Or confuse him.

“Well whoever you are, you can’t be with the horses without me.” He put his tools down and came over to them. He walked up to the stall and patted the horse affectionately. “They truly are a sight to see. You’ve a good eye girl. What do they call you?”

“Marta”, she said and quickly followed up with “and this is Stranger”, pointing to her.

He chuckled at the name, taking in her height and facial features. “She is isn’t she? Probably looks like a different world if you were up on that horseback. Bet you’ve never seen the world from so high?”, delighted at his own wit.

Stranger smiled, her eyes darting to Marta’s face and back to the stablehand.

He offered his hand to Stranger. “I’m Sven. Of Sillum.” Looking back at the horses he said: “I have the honor of caring for the most beautiful creatures in all our land.”

“They really really are”, Marta beamed at them. “Do you have a favourite? I don’t think I could pick a favourite.”

“I couldn’t either”, he pointed to the largest one across the aisle. “That there is ‘Thunder Crashes’, the King’s personal horse. The next stall is Whispering Trees, who belongs to the Queen. She loves her horses rides em all the time! Or she did before the Warpact. Those three belong to the messengers”, he pointed at three black horses, “And the rest belong to the warriors, they use them as they see fit.”

Suddenly Marta had a thought. “Which ones do guests use?”

“If you’re asking for yourself lass, you’d need the King’s permission. These animals are precious, now more than ever.”

“Oh I hadn’t thought about that. I could ask Egmond, sorry Leader Heilingsson, and he could ask the King, but no I wasn’t thinking about riding them. I was wondering which ones Leaders Heilingsson took the night they were killed by Warpact.”

He pulled back a little. He walked back to his bucket and brought it to the oats, filling it slowly. “How do you know about that girl?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Around here? No. Most around here think it was a bear attack.”

“Oh. Why?”

“King didn’t want any fuss and fear about the Warpact”, his pride at being in the know covered his face. “Course that was before we knew they were actually coming back. Anyway, those horses are gone. We don’t have them anymore. They disappeared into the woods. Or were taken. Why do you want to know about them?”

“Well...I’m Heilingsson. Gaior and Nila were my Leaders. It was a shock to all of us.”

The oat bucket now full, he walked down the aisle pouring some into a small trough at each horse stable. “Yes. A shock.”

“It kind of doesn’t make sense does it? Warpact hid in the woods, killed exactly two people, who happened to be Leaders of a different clan and then disappeared? Did you notice anything...odd. That night.”

The bucket now empty, he grabbed a large armload of hay and shoved it at Marta. “Help out girl if you’re going to keep me yapping.” Handing another armload to Stranger he said: “No. Nothing odd that night. They liked riding those two. Went out with the King and Queen often for rides around the countryside. Had gone riding a few days before on a hunt.”, he shoved hay into a feeder, motioning for them to do the same on other stalls. “No. Nothing odd that night.”

Marta was near the end of the stalls, putting the last of her hay in a feeder, she reached in to pet the horse on the nose and Sven said: “Maybe you don’t touch that one.”

“What? Why? Does he bite?”, jerking her hand back, then slowly reaching out again.

“Bite. No. That’s ‘Rolling Avalanche’”, he pulled her away from the stall by her elbow. Stranger looked concerned.

He sighed. “You are trouble aren’t you girl?”

“It’s been said.”

“Hhhmm”, he sat on a bench along a wall of supplies. “‘Rolling Avalanche’ is one of the messenger’s horses. You asked if anything strange happened that night, no. But the day after them horses went missing, Avalanche here was skittish as can be.”

He looked Marta in the eyes.

“He’d seen something. He was frightened that morning. And I think he’d been ridden. I know I brushed him after that hunt. And the hunt had come before the rain.” He shifted on the bench, grabbing a handful of seeds out of a bucket. “He ain’t been the same since then.”

“Not the same how?”

“Did you know horses dream?”

“I don’t know much about horses at all.”

“Well they do. That one”, pointing at Rolling Avalanche, “He has nightmares.”

“How do you know he has nightmares?”

“‘Cause he screams. A horse scream ain’t a pretty sound. There’s been talk of getting rid of him, but how do you just ‘get rid’ of something worth that much? He still runs just fine so the messengers still use him, but they draw lots to see who has to take him. They think he’s cursed.”

“Well a horse that screams from nightmares *does* sound like something to avoid.”

“Aye it does at that.” He didn’t say anything else.

“So that’s all? Nothing else happened strange?”

He shook his head. Then, leaning back he popped a few seeds in his mouth and chewed for a moment before saying: “If it’s strange knowledge you’re after...I know a woman who can help out with that.”

“Help out how?”

“If you gotta ask girl, you probably don’t wanna know.”

She perked up. “I wanna know.”

The street was pinched with bodies. It looked the same as home, but three times more of it. Where a street back home was 3 houses in a row across from a pasture and a barn, the streets here were 3 houses

in a row followed by 3 houses in a row across from the same. Even shops. Back home a weaver worked out of their home. Here there were buildings whose sole purpose was being a shop.

She was meant to look for a sign with a purple flower on it. That was apparently a shop that did nothing but alter clothes to fit better. To fit better!

Everywhere she looked people moved around. They walked past a section of sheep fenced in tightly, likely meant for the slaughter. Days it must take herds to feed all these people.

Stranger looked bored.

Someone bumped up against her, almost knocking her down. Stranger grabbed her arm then started rifling through Marta's pockets. She pointed at the man walking away quickly and said: "Bad! Take!"

"Take? What do you mean...Oh. He tried to rob me!", then she laughed and pulled her pockets inside out. "Nothing to take."

Stranger grinned. "Good."

From what the stablehand had said, this should be the street the shop was on. Stretching her neck she looked up and down the street. There! Only a few buildings down she could see the sign. She grabbed Stranger's hand. Yanking her along, she wove through the crowd, causing a few grumbles along the way, and came to a stop in front of the gap between the shop and its neighbor.

Down this dark passage was information. Knowledge. A way to find out more.

Stranger tugged her arm and looked worriedly into Marta's eyes.

"We don't have a choice do we? Well, you do, but I guess if you don't go with me, your choices become limited."

"Into the darkness we go."

The space between the buildings wasn't so different than out on the street.

Well that wasn't quite true. The side of the buildings were basically the same as the front, but the light was very different.

And the people.

There were people back here. Fewer than on the street, but the same kind of people as out on the street. Actually not the same kind. You could see it on their faces. Stranger didn't look bored now.

A few twists and turns and they found the place. It looked like a small hump in the ground. Oddly placed in the buildings jammed tight around it. It was made mostly of earth with some wooden beams framing a door. The door was open. Instead of hesitating, she walked right in.

Before her eyes could adjust, a lightly accented voice said: "You could have knocked."

"Oh. Sorry, it's just...", she hesitated.

Stranger walked in behind her. The woman she presumed was the seer, hissed.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Marta”, she said. “I was told to come see you about...information.”

“Not you! Her!”

“Stranger? She’s...Stranger”, how do you describe Stranger?

“You don’t know her?”

“No, I know her, but we call her Stranger”, honestly that needed to change.

“Yes. I agree”, the woman said considering Stranger. “It is a good name for her.”

“Sit”, she gestured at a table in the corner. “What information do you come for? And what will you give for it?”

Marta stopped as she had grabbed the back of a chair.

“I didn’t think about that. The ‘giving’ I mean, obviously I know what information I need, well I think I know what information I need, but...payment. What do you take as payment?”

“Sit”, Marta sat. Stranger sat on a stool next to Marta. The seer’s eyes hadn’t left her.

“Everyone can pay. Everyone has something to give. She can pay”, pointing at Stranger. Stranger’s eyes went wide. “Who is she?”

This woman sold information from the darkness. So Marta said: “She is someone who lives up in the mountains near where I am from. I am clan Heilingsson.”

That didn’t reveal too much did it?

“No she is not”, the woman pulled out a few clay cups. Pouring a dark liquid into each, she asked: “What information do you seek?”

“I want to know what happened on a certain day. To certain people.” No reason to hesitate now. “People who were killed.”

The seer set a cup in front of each of them. “There are many who would balk at such information”, she said. “Do you know what you ask?”

“I think I know.”

“You must be sure you know. For that kind of information.”

“You are going to invoke the Older Ones.”

“And you accept this?”

“I don’t really have a choice. I need to know what happened. Something is wrong and something wrong happened and I need to know.”

“I understand”, the woman swirled the darkness in her cup. “I can help you. For a price.”

“I already said I don’t have anything. And I don’t think Stranger does either. Where we come from, money is used less than barter and I didn’t bring anything to barter. I should have brought things to barter...”

“As I said. She can pay.” Looking straight into Stranger’s eyes she said: “She can give a piece of herself.”

“Absolutely not!”, Marta stood up quickly. Stranger’s stool clattered as she hurried behind Marta.

“Wait wait wait!”, the seer gestured for them to sit. “I tell her fortune. This is all I take of her.”

Marta sat back down so Stranger did too. She definitely wasn’t bored though.

“You want to tell her fortune? As payment for telling me information?”

The seer nodded.

“How do you tell her fortune?”

“The same way I give you information”, she picked up her cup. “We all drink and then I burn incense.” After a moment: “And then I see.” Another beat: “Three is better than two anyway. I will see more.”

Marta looked at the cup in front of her. The black liquid a hole in the table.

“What’s in it?”

“Cloudberry wine and some herbs.”

“What kind of herbs?”

“If you are applying to apprentice, I will tell you in your fifth year.”

They looked at each other for a moment and Marta asked: “Like, special festival night cloudberry wine or every day cloudberry wine?”

“The special kind. You will stay here until its affects wear off”.

Now that her eyes had adjusted, Marta could see a well worn bench in an alcove. The building was more comfortable looking inside than out. A shelf behind the seer held cups and plates. A rack near the bench had clothing dripping on it. Through a curtain she could see dirt stairs that led somewhere underground. In fact it looked like it went below the building next door.

The seer continued: “No more than an hour. For you.” “For this small one, it may last a little bit longer”, looking at Stranger. “If it does anything”, she said, almost to herself.

It seemed a small price to pay. And she had no other payment.

“Ok, but I have to talk to her first. She hasn’t had this kind of cloudberry wine.”

The seer smiled and nodded. Information.

Turning to Stranger, who looked back expectantly, Marta said: “We’re going to drink this”, pointing at a cup and each of them. “And it’s going to make us feel weird”, she put her hands on her head and acted woozy. “And you might see things”, she pointed around the room and looked scared, then sharply crossed her hands in a “no!” motion. “Everything will be ok”, she put a big smile on her face.

Stranger’s eyes searched Marta’s face. She nodded softly.

The seer reached behind her on the shelf and grabbed a pot of incense. Placing it between all three of them, she lit it from a burning ember from under the stove. The smell of earth in the room increased. Next she picked up her cup and swirled the liquid around in it. Marta followed her example, then Stranger as well.

The inky darkness in the cup caught some light as it swirled, the herbs breaking up the surface. It was just cloudberry wine and herbs. She’d had this kind before. Once. Last year at the festival. She didn’t try it again this year.

“Drink”, said the seer. Marta drank. It was actually pleasant to drink. Most people found the part after pleasant too. She hadn’t.

Three cups hit the table together.

She knew the effects wouldn’t take long. She sat back in her chair and watched the seer who watched Stranger who watched them both.

A steady rope of earthen incense pushed the sea out of the air. The woman was drumming her fingers on the table. Her head started throbbing in time. She didn’t like this part.

Thrum...thrum...thrum...thrum. Her heartbeat in her ears pushed away the waves.

Thrum..thrum..THRUM..thrum. The tightness travelled down to her chest, leaving her head behind.

Thrum..thrum..THRUMTHRUM. It moved on to her stomach. Then to her arms and legs. She lifted her arms as the tightness spread to her fingers and toes. It felt like the air was binding her.

THRUMTHRUMTHRUMTHRUM... All at once and everywhere at once, the tightness lifted. Leaving her as an island in the fog of incense.

[todo: something about things in the fog]

The seer’s voice came from silence of the fog.

“You need to know of the death of friends. Tell me what you know.”

“Uuumm...I know that everyone says they left for a romantic night ride through the countryside and that supposedly they were attacked by Warpact scouts or something like that.”

“You are right. The ride was not for romance. The ride was to touch on darkness.”

[todo: expand a little]

“What do you mean?”, the fog felt warmer, and her skin was feeling tight again.

“I see your friends”, the voice was more distant now. Her heartbeat was back in her ears. thrum thrum thrum thrum. “I see Nila. Leader of clan Heilingsson. Sister to Queen Tani. The first Queen of our land. Maybe the last.”

“How do you know who I meant? What do you see? How do you see her?”

Thrum thrum THRUM thrum.

“I see Nila”, the voice was nearly gone and strained, “because Nila sees me”.

The fog crashed in on the beat, washing her out to sea.

She woke on the bench, with Stranger’s head on her shoulder. She had never seen Stranger smile so peacefully.

Clattering from the stairs preceded the seer, carrying a tray. Seeing Marta’s eyes open, she put the tray down on the table. Grabbing a bowl from the shelf, she scooped a heap of steaming potatoes and carrots into the bowl. She placed it in Marta’s hand and said: “The food from the earth will save you a headache tonight.”

The food smelled better than anything she’d ever eaten. Around a large spoonful she asked: “What did you see? About my friends. About Nila.”

“I do not know”. At the look on Marta’s face the seer sneered and said: “I can only see when in the fog, but I can remember what I felt.”

She filled a bowl for Stranger, setting it on the bench, then one for herself and sat at the table.

“What I felt was that I was being seen”, she said quietly. “Nila’s death was not an accident. It was necessary. For what, I do not know.” She stirred her bowl. “Something wanted Nila to die and she died for a purpose.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Then the seer chuckled.

“Normally when I cannot tell you of a birth, or a marriage, or a good harvest or catch”, she looked at Stranger asleep on the bench, “Normally I would not take payment.”

“What did you see about her?”

The seer thought for a moment.

“I do not see her. She is there” gesturing at Stranger “but she is not *here*” and waved vaguely around. “She is here, but she is not *there*.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

The seer wouldn't say anything else.

After Stranger woke and had some food, they went back out into the darkness of the city.

With Stranger resting in their room, she searched for Egmond.

She found him on a balcony, watching the ocean.

She understood why. In the mountains, the views were high. But they were not infinite.

Walking up to the balcony edge to stand next to him, she didn't say anything.

The crashing waves reminded her too much of the seer's fog though.

"Egmond", she started. How do you start something like this?

After a few moments of silence Egmond said: "Yes? Are you ok?"

Was she ok? Yes. She was afraid he wouldn't be.

"I need to tell you something about your parents. About their death."

Egmond searched her face but didn't say anything.

"I was talking to the stablehand. I wanted to go look at the horses. They're such beautiful animals, you know that. Majestic, you know? Anyway, I wanted to look at the horses and I just wondered if I could ride them, and well...you see, he basically said [??] and I think someone was with your parent's that night, and came back to Thornvaal without them."

He was silent. He looked upset.

"And because of [??] I went into Thornvaal to a seer he told me about", he interrupted her.

"Marta! A seer?", he asked. "You, of all people, to a seer?" He looked worried. "Did she give you anything? Take anything?"

"Egmond, don't be silly. That's superstitious nonsense", she waved him off. "Everyone knows that."

Was a world of fog and a voice superstitious?

"Well, she did give me and Stranger some festival cloudberry wine to drink."

"Stranger? You take her everywhere now?"

"More like: 'she follows me everywhere'. But how can I blame her? She is a skittish little thing and seems to have latched onto me."

"So you went to a seer and you drank wine that gives visions", he said flatly, "and I bet you passed out. How do you know she didn't take anything?"

“The only thing I had worth taking was a belt knife and [??] and I had both of those when I left the place.”

“Only the seer knows what you had worth taking.”

What was in Stranger’s fog?

“Is that all you wanted to tell me?”, he looked angry now. “That [??] and you dabbled in the occult?”

“I didn’t ‘dabble’ in the occult”, she said. “I went to a seer, and I drank the wine and she said that something dark happened on that day. When she was talking about it she was freaked out”, he looked angrier. No reason to stop now. “She said she saw your mother and your mother saw her. She knew her name.”

He slapped the balustrade. “Of course she knew her name! There aren’t many clan leaders murdered in cold blood by Warpact on the doorstep of Thornvaal. People gossip!”

“I didn’t tell her any of that. All I said was that they went for a ride at night and people say Warpact...killed them.”

“Marta, don’t be a fool. How many people in this town go for a night ride on horses?”

“I didn’t say horses!”, now she was angry. “It could have been a donkey!”

He shook his head. “You of all people. You went to a charlatan. You *hope* you went to a charlatan, because of some gossip and superstition you heard from a stablehand”, he scoffed.

“Egmund, a third horse left the city that night! And it came home without them.”

“Animals go home Marta. And maybe it never actually left that night. Maybe your stablehand friend was covering for himself because he forgot to brush down a horse from a hunt.”

She was silent for a few moments. His shoulders moved in a heavy rhythm while he stared into her eyes.

“You never talk about them”, she said.

He exploded. “My parents were murdered Marta! Murdered by people who are trying to murder us all! What is there to talk about? These people don’t want to stop! They come here, specifically to kill us. They caught my parents unaware because we were not watchful. I’m here to make them pay. What do you want me to TALK ABOUT?!”

She backed away from the edge.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just wanted to talk to you about it. To let you know, in case you”

“My parents were killed by Warpact. I’m here to do something about that. I don’t want you playing with the occult anymore. We’ve enough to worry about without calling down darkness on our heads.”

He turned abruptly and left her behind on the balcony, looking into infinite fog and darkness.

It was easy to find the place. Just off the trail was a pile of flowers, trinkets, and talismans. Gifts for the recently dead. Some for helping the departed in the next life. Others for helping those who remained behind. Beyond that a hole of broken bushes and fallen tree limbs led through the treeline to a gully. As if the horses had crashed through the undergrowth. Except the horses made it back to Thornvaal. Were they running from something and thrown? Both of them? When had Nila been stabbed?

It didn't make sense.

They stood looking over the gully's edge together. Stranger said: "We down?"

"Yes, we'll climb down. Somehow", she waved vaguely at the gully.

Stranger sat down on the edge of the gully, turned around and lowered herself in. Carefully placing each hand and foot, she made her way down the nearly-vertical side of the gully like she was slowly walking backwards down a wall.

She *was* slowly walking backwards down a wall.

Surprised, Marta tried to emulate Stranger's posture. Placing each hand and foot carefully in the same general area as Stranger, she found it easier than she'd expected. All she had to do was keep leaning forward, and be intentional about where she put her weight. She learned that lesson easier than she deserved. Placing her foot carelessly while watching Stranger, had sent her sliding down instead of climbing down. Stranger caught her though. She made a "calm" motion with her hand and deliberately moved slowly as if showing Marta what to do, not where to step.

At the bottom, Stranger leapt lightly to a large stone a good distance from the wall. She reached out to catch Marta's arm when she jumped.

Marta landed in the mud.

Stranger's laughter bounced off the walls. An unexpectedly light sound. She hadn't heard Stranger laugh yet. It made her smile. Then it made her laugh. Then her laughter unbalanced her and she sat in the mud.

That put Stranger into tears. Which put Marta in hysterics.

Their laughter eventually faded and they both sighed "aaaaahh" at the same time, which was hilarious.

After *that* laughter faded, Stranger hauled her up onto the wide flat stone. They brushed mud and dirt off themselves. Marta looked around the floor of the gully. It was mostly mud, gravel, and a trickle of water through the middle. Occasionally the mud was broken up by large stones like they stood on, or tree limbs. But that was it. Down in the gully, nothing stood out any more than from the top. The mud had washed away any sign that anyone had been down here before. Even now, the spot in the mud she had sat was filling itself in.

“I don’t get it Stranger”, she didn’t expect a reply. “There is nothing around here. There isn’t anything to see, it’s just a path and trees, and it’s much too far away from Thornvaal for a casual ride. Why go this far?” Stranger waited until she stopped talking, shrugged, then pointed up and down the gully and raised her eyebrows.

“Well”, she thought for a moment. “I suppose it’s possible that the mud flow washed something that way?” she pointed down the gully.

With a series of leaps, plops and grunts they made their way down stream. Even though Stranger was much shorter than her, she found herself struggling to jump to stones that Stranger bounded to easily. Eventually Stranger started choosing closer stones, and found a sturdy stick to pull Marta out of the mud the rest of the time.

The mud dried up eventually. The gully narrowed, and the ground above the walls came down. They were traveling downhill, toward the sea.

The sun was much lower in the sky when they saw the end of the gully, walls still twice as tall as Marta. The same landscape as the whole way down the gully, though much less mud now. Small trees, large stones, bushes. Exactly what you’d expect to find in the wilderness. Except.

“Well that isn’t right”, she said while Stranger scanned the ground. “Stranger”, she grabbed the woman’s arm, “Look at that stone. Do you see anything strange?”

Stranger looked where she pointed, looked back at Marta, pointed to herself and said: “Strange?”

“No”, Marta shook her head, “Not ‘stanger’ but...odd. Weird. Unexpected.”

Stranger didn’t seem to understand. Which she should have expected. She had learned some words. But they were mostly for things she needed, or food, or greetings. ‘Unexpected’ was going to be a complex one.

Marta ran up to the stone. Its edge nestled in the ground. It was almost a circle, taller than Stranger but shorter than Marta. It would take a few *big* warriors to move it. And someone had moved it.

“Look”, she pointed at the dirt on the side of the stone. Dirt from the ground. Dirt not currently touching the ground. “Someone rolled this stone”, making a turning motion.

Stranger looked at the stone, then at Marta, then her eyes went wide.

They got down on the ground to examine it closer. It was a normal looking stone. Large, pitted, gray. Resting in the ground and the wall of the gully like a rock thrown at thick mud. By a giant.

Any holes and crevices they found led into darkness and were barely big enough for field mice anyway. Marta stood back to think. The wall of the gully wasn’t exactly a wall. The angle was shallow enough they should be able to climb out easily. Much easier than on the way in.

“So one night at Thornvaal, a few days before returning home to Heilingsson, Gaior and Nila decide to go for a romantic night ride on horses, telling no one they were taking these very rare and expensive animals

out, and when on that ride they ended up hours away from the city, in a place where nothing is and no one would be, and were brutally murdered and ended up in the bottom of a gully at the end of a trail of destruction that could only be caused by something very large and out of control, and at the end of that gully is a giant stone that would take a team of large men to move, and that stone has moved recently. It doesn't make sense."

Stranger alternated nodding and shrugging. Occasionally even at the right times.

Chapter 12

Traveling through Sillum lands was different. Everything was flatter for one thing. Even though there were hills, they rolled more than spiked. The space was more open. Trees grew in groups with open land between. Some groups were large enough to call a "forest" but there was always more open space on the other side. At the beginning the sea stretched out to their left forever. Egmond loved that. It reminded him of looking over a valley from the heights. Endless distance. All the way up to the wall of fog that kept them apart from the world for so long. Everything must end though. They moved inland as they marched. Staying along the coast would have given any Warpact ships early warning of their movements.

They spent the day in a light jog, taking breaks for meals and rest. The donkeys of their land were stocky animals. Most short enough that a man could stand on either side of it without touching its back. They were amazing pack animals, but not a comfortable riding experience. They brought most of the King's horses, and Wuirthing had a few of his own. Those were mostly given over to scouts and messengers.

At night, tents were erected by some, bedrolls placed under the sky by others. A city of chaos grew anywhere they stopped. Some made meals, some joked with friends, some practiced fighting and some simply collapsed.

Egmond thought he would be one of those. Short distance running was very different to running every day, all day long, from sunup to sundown. Something in him fed his energy though.

A few days into the march, they rested in the late afternoon. Egmond sat on a log on top of a hill, looking over the landscape. Tormund sat on the ground beside him carving something. Tormund wouldn't detach from him on this march. He still rankled that Laya had nearly kept him away from the fighting. [todo: write scene where Egmond realizes Tormund is on the march]

"What are you always carving?"

"It's a little wolf", he held up the rough body for Egmond to see. "I get bored running messages, when I rest I mean. It's nice to have something to do. I make figures and give them as gifts."

"May I join you nephew?", Torstin walked up. "No, don't stand."

Egmond sat back down. "Absolutely."

Torstin lowered his bulk to the ground beside the log. Tormund watched him with wide eyes. Torstin saw this. “Boy, you’re a messenger right?”

“Yes...your highness.”

Torstin grunted. “Run a message for me. Go find [???]. I want some scouts down by the coast in this final stretch. Tell them to keep an eye out for Warpact ships in the area.”

“Yes your highness!” Tormund scrambled up, dropping his carving, and rushed off.

Torstin chuckled and picked up the carving. “Even after all these years ‘your highness’ sounds wrong. You younger folk use it like breathing.”

“What do you expect? Most of us can’t remember a time before you were King. And you’re the first King our people have ever had.”

He examined the carving, turning it over. His fingers traced the grooves. “That’s good work. He might be wasted as a messenger.”

“Don’t tell him that”, Egmond grinned.

They sat in silence, the wind brushing the grasses.

“Messenger is a good occupation”, said Torstin abruptly. “So is carpenter. And weaver and healer. As long as the lad doesn’t want to be a warrior.”

“Actually, I think he does. What’s wrong with that? We need warriors more than we need carpenters.”

Torstin sighed, the carving holding his gaze, turning in his hands. “I would change that if I could.”

“What do you mean?”

He put the carving in his pocket. Leaning back against the log he said: “When I was young, I wanted to be a warrior. When my grandfather was young, every young boy, and many girls, wanted to be warriors. By the time I was your age, there were no great battles.” He looked out at the grassland. “Did you know it’s said our people once covered this land so thickly that you couldn’t throw a stone without hitting someone’s house or crop or aunt?”

“No. I can’t imagine that. The mountains are so quiet, you can walk 100 meters and be alone.”

“Legend says it. We were once great. In number and deed. That’s where Thornvaal came from they say. There are a few other great stone buildings up in the North in fact. And ruins in every clan’s land.”

Egmond nodded. There were ruins near his home, stone walls no higher than his knee. But stone when all their buildings were wood.

Torstin continued: “There were once so many of us, that there was nowhere else to grow. So our people argued. Over land, over flocks, over marriages. When you push people too close together, fights are inevitable. The legends say that’s where the clans and the Champions came from.”

Warily, Egmond listened in silence. Everyone knew about the Champions but they weren't a thing to discuss in the open. Not much about the Older Ones was.

Torstin picked up a stick, turning it in his hands like the wolf figurine. "People fought, and people grouped together. The Champions led the wars. Our numbers dwindled. The legends don't say why the Champions disappeared. But we kept fighting. By the time of my grandfather, the taste for battle was dying out. People saw a better way." He tossed the stick out into the grass.

"We need warriors though. The Warpact won't let us live without them."

"No. They won't." Torstin's gaze was far off, toward the sea. "They won't let us live."

Abruptly he said: "Bah! I came here to check on you, sitting like a statue to be admired."

Egmond laughed. "I was admiring your land. It's so different from the mountains."

"We're probably in Judges land by now actually."

"You don't know where your border with Judges is?"

"It's always been different with Judges. Did you never have a Judge up in Heilingsson?"

"Once, when I was little. A disagreement between my father and Oronskar, over a flock's grazing rights." Egmond hesitated. "My father usually settled most disputes in the clan himself."

"That sounds like him", Torstin said quietly. "The Judges don't have many warriors and they don't fight with neighbors." He stood up abruptly. "Which is why the fools let Warpact on their land. The idiots probably thought they could argue for peace. Rest well lad. There will be no peace at the end of this journey."

He walked away, leaving Egmond in silence.

The towers watched the landscape like sentinels. They were laid out around the peak of a small hill, a crooked triangle, two paths leading in, one leading uphill into the mountains.

The three towers were virtually identical, thin stone structures, dark granite. The largest sat on the highest point of the hill and would have topped the tallest towers in Thornvaal by spans.

Torstin had the men set up a distance away. Egmond and Wuirthing brought a few men each on the long walk up the hill. The path up to the towers crunched as they walked, the black gravel laid cleanly, not a single weed or blade of grass poked through.

It wound up the hill like a large snake, sinuous and lithe. As they crested the hilltop, Egmond got his first sight of the famous Judges conclave.

It was nothing. Mostly empty. Carts lay stacked neatly against the base of the nearest tower, straw bales lined up in rows beside the cards. A small paddock held some pigs, clucking came from a fenced off area,

the slats of the fence so tight he couldn't see the other side. There was a garden, plants lined up in neat rows, everything orderly.

But no one anywhere in sight.

"Surely they know we were coming?", he said.

Wuirthing chuckled dryly. "Oh they know."

Torstin growled, "The bastards don't care."

Egmund was surprised. The Judges were always spoken about with reverence.

Torstin continued, "They can see for miles from those towers. Not that they bother. The Judges are only concerned about one direction." He pointed up at the mountains. "If you followed that trail into the hills, you'd find it dotted with shrines, pavilions for sitting and thinking, and most of the Judges laying around in a stupor of cloudberry wine."

Wuirthing nodded. "They spend weeks at a time in the foothills and mountains. But you can bet someone is around."

Torstin sighed, "You can bet someone is watching us right now. Derive rarely leaves the enclave and loves to make me wait."

"Who is Derive?", Egmund had never heard an individual Judge's name. The few times one had come all the way to Elderglen, they were simply called 'Judge'.

"Derive is the de-facto leader of the Judges. The crazy bastards insist they are all equal, but there is always someone in charge anyway."

As if on cue, the door of the main tower opened. A tall man stood silhouetted in the entrance for a moment before coming into the light.

'Tall' didn't do him justice. Torstin and Henrik were tall men. All of their people were tall, judging by the height difference with outsiders, but this man was head and shoulders above Torstin. And on second look, 'man' nearly didn't describe him either. 'Skeleton' fit better. Wrists barely wider than bone poked from long sleeves. When he walked, his pants, baggy where they would have been tight on any other man, swept against legs that could have been hidden stilts.

"King Torstin, Leader Vyoss," he said as he approached, his voice a rumble that surprised Egmund, "have you come to take the Vow?"

Torstin barked, "No, you old fool. I've come to right your mistakes."

The tall man nodded. "You speak of our infestation of vermin I believe? Come, I will show you."

He turned and walked toward the largest tower, without another word. Torstin growled but followed, Wuirthing fell in step, pulling Egmund along. Their men stayed outside in the area between the towers.

Egmund expected the inside of the tower to be dark, but it was much lighter inside than the black stone would seem. Through the doorway, large enough that Derive didn't even duck, the ground floor of the tower was one open room, roughly forty paces across.

Walking through the entrance, Egmund saw that a balcony wrapped around the full interior, creating a ceiling just above them. Passing under it, he looked up, a dizziness coming over him.

The light in the place came from the completely open center of the building. All the way to the peaked ceiling high in the heavens at the spire of the tower.

Somehow, the tower felt taller inside than it seemed outside.

Balconies ran around the ring of the interior, at every floor. Stone balustrades of the same color as the rest of the building, keeping the edges of the balconies reigned in. Except the top floor. That balcony all the way up in the sky, just below the peaked dome, it ran most of the circle, but had an opening in the railing, a good pace wide.

His eyes travelled down from that gap, in an arc, to the floor in the center of the main room. A large metal spike poked up, four feet into the air. It could be metal, its color not quite the black of the stone, but ran inconsistently, as if stained.

Derive was watching him. When Egmund made eye contact, the man said to Torstin: "Is this one here to find out more about the mysteries of the Older Ones?"

Torstin snapped impatiently, "'This one' is Leader Heilingsson. And no one will be taking the Vow today Judge. Time is wasting, take me to what I need to see."

The Judge kept his eyes on Egmund, but said to Torstin, "Though you hold the power of a king, it is not for you to say who and when the Vow is taken. You know this. But," he turned and strode to a door on their right, "You speak wisdom when you ask for haste."

Opening the door, he stepped aside and gestured at a staircase.

The climb was excruciating. Egmund though climbing was simple, fun even, he was a boy from the mountains, scaling rock faces, leaping boulder to boulder, going up was in his bones.

But ninety-nine stories of stairs, he counted, was a kind of torture. The thin arms and legs of the Judge made some sense now. He kept going though. He couldn't look weak in front of his uncle and Wuirthing. He was here for a battle. A boy would complain.

Derive opened the door at the top of the staircase directly in front of the gap in the balcony. He could have taken a few strides and leapt off, something pulled at him to do it. He knew the first thing he would hit was the spike at the bottom.

But they turned to the left, following the curve of the building, passing by other doors, all closed, until they were almost directly opposite the gap.

In the wall was a ladder. More climbing.

Derive slithered up and pushed aside a trap door, light bursting in, revealing gray sky.

Torstin followed, then Wuirthing. Egmond groaned involuntarily. But he climbed, dragging his dead limbs up each rung, one after the other, eyes locked to his shaking hands and legs, willing them to keep going.

He crawled up the final stretch and pulled himself through the hole. It took a moment for his brain to adjust to what he saw. They stood on a small section of flattened roof, no more than six feet wide. It curved around the central spire behind them, wrapping around the building. The edge was only a few paces away, the only thing separating them from the vast open air below was a small bannister, a foot high, such an awkward height it seemed more of a tripping hazard than safety feature.

But what a view.

To the left, the foothills of the mountains rose, green grasses and brush fading into black granite, as the elevation rose. The same stone as the towers, giving the impression that you could step off the edge and keep walking uphill.

To the right was something entirely different. There was nothing. Open space, into the infinite distance. He leaned forward warily, the edge of land coming into view a dizzying distance down.

Derive spoke, causing Egmond to jump. "You see there," he pointed to a far off place, where foothills met flatlands.

Egmond didn't see what he was pointing to at first. The gray haze in the distance obscuring the landscape. The haze grew thicker there, as smoke from many fires dissolved into the air at the crest of a hill.

Derive continued. "A man was sent many weeks ago. He did not return. Another was sent. He did not return. The third was sent to you."

"The Older Ones be raised," Torstin mumbled, pulling a scowl from the Judge. "How did you let so many on your land unmolested? Unseen?!"

The Judge's face held the scowl. "As you well know, our numbers are not what they were in days gone by. They dwindle year by year. The young no longer seek our council. Even fewer seek to serve as one of our order. The two lost to these invaders already, is not insignificant. You were alerted."

Torstin's face grew redder as the man spoke. Now his anger bubbled over. "If you would let me man these towers, your two men would still live."

"All who stay here must take the Vow."

"Damn your Vow!", Torstin snapped.

Derive snorted. "You are welcome to try. King."

The two men held each other's gaze, one simmering, the other quietly confident. Egmond worried about the consequences of Torstin's anger where a small misstep could send one plummeting, with the ground

an age away.

Wuirthing broke the tension. “We have been alerted. Now we must decide what to do.”

Derive took the moment to look away from Torstin, maybe not as confident as he seemed staring down that anger.

Torstin looked back toward the smoke. “At a hard push, we could make it to them with light still today.”

Abruptly, he turned back to the ladder and climbed down.

Egmund rushed after him. “Shouldn’t we send some scouts? We don’t know how many, or even where they are exactly?”

Torstin didn’t stop at the bottom of the ladder, his long strides making Egmund hurty to keep up, reminding him of his fatigue.

“And have their scouts find us? No, we hit them hard, and fast. By the smoke, they likely number equal to our force. We will surprise the dogs and leave only dead.”

He said nothing else on the climb down, the silence broken only by creaking leather and Egmund’s panting.

The scout reports brought the march to the entrance of the valley, granite covered hills framed a small section of woodland hiding more plains in the valley. The entrance to the valley was narrow enough that the band entered in columns, warriors stretching the width of the valley rock to rock.

Torstin had raged again at Derive for the fool he was to not know his own land enough to be aware of this place.

At the inner edge of the woodland, the valley opened up wider. A long stretch of grass-lands sloping upward, walled in by sheer stone and boulders, narrowing again at the other end where wooden palisades spread the width of the valley.

Behind the palisades stood a tower, large tree trunks leaning together, topped by a platform swarming with activity.

Egmund stood at the wood’s edge with Torstin, Wuirthing and some of the other clan leaders. Henrik stood at his side. Derive refused to accompany them. The gaunt giant blandly informed Torstin he had no desire to leave his tower and his worship.

The Warpact encampment was distant enough that they could only just make out individual Warpact.

“What I wouldn’t give to know their true number before we cross that valley,” Wuirthing complained.

Egmund found this a strange wish. “Why not send scouts up into the hills? Heilingsson men could climb those rocks. If we’re quick, we could have a force behind them unseen.”

Torstin scowled. “We face them head on, like warriors of honor.”

Even Henrik's face soured.

Torstin continued in a growl, "Their number doesn't matter. We face the dogs either way and we send them to the dirt where they belong."

"But we can catch them unaware —", Egmond started before Torstin barked: "They know we are here. They would have had scouts in this wood, watching the land around. When they spotted us, they would have turned tail and run to their hole," he gestured toward the makeshift fort at the other end of the valley.

"He's right lad," said Wuirthing. "They don't often make sense, but they aren't fools."

Torstin scowled at the man. "They *are* fools. They are fools for thinking they could return to this isle. They are fools for thinking they could take me on again."

His voice had taken on an animalistic rumble. This was not the same man who had spoken kindly with Egmond on the plains a few days ago.

Uncharacteristically, Wuirthing had no biting retort. "As you say," he said quietly, nodding once.

Torstin looked at Henrik. "Today we find out if the tales of your prowess are true. Between you and me, we will wash them out of this valley with their own blood."

Abruptly, he turned and strode back into the woods to the waiting warriors. The gathered leaders went with him.

Henrik made eye contact with Egmond, grinning before following the group. Egmond hurried to keep up.

In no time, they were back at the edge of the woodland, the thousands of warriors spread out behind Torstin. The messengers and scouts stayed back with the horses, ponies, and pack animals. The horses were too precious to risk against archers and the rest too slow to be of use in battle. To Egmond's relief, Tormund was back there too. It had taken another bout of arguing to get him to stay behind.

Torstin's speech had been short. No shouting, no banging shields, nothing like the stories. He had simply called out: "The dogs hide behind walls. They put archers in the tower. They are afraid."

His words repeated down the line, warriors nodding and preparing, all moving together to the wood's edge where they waited calmly. Too many of them smiled. Looked eager. It was madness.

Egmond found himself near the right flank with Henrik and other Heilingsson warriors. That was the only strategy Torstin had bothered with. He stayed in the middle, Henrik on the right, and the bulk of the force on the left.

"Spread out evenly," he said.

With no word given, Torstin stepped out of the cover of the trees, walking calmly into the open and the gathered warriors followed in one giant mass, like an anthill opened up, erupting from the earth.

Across the valley, the Warpact camp buzzed like a hornet's nest disturbed.

Halfway across the expanse of open land, the purposeful walk turned into a job, the long legs of the Norselike eating up ground. The loping run still held a casual grace. Predators, confident in their ability to kill, in no hurry. In their element. Egmond tried to keep up, tried to hold their casual indifference.

Only when the first Warpact arrows flew, did the warriors run. Not in fear. Not away. Their prey in sight, the hunters closed the distance.

Shield above his head, Egmond ran, yelling wordlessly, his voice joining the chorus.

Arrows flew and landed, men screamed in pain and anger. Time slowed. The concentration of arrows went toward the center of their advance, Egmond easily dodged the few targeting their flank, and suddenly the warriors crashed into the Warpact flooding out of the gaps in the wall.

Roars and screams mixed with the barbarous cries of Warpact into an otherworldly distance.

Bodies in the tight spaces pushed like waves. Egmond sensed the ebb and flow, moving forward and back, timing the crash. The waves parted easily with his sword, Warpact faces in a rictus of rage turned slack as his blade slipped effortlessly into ribcages and throats. Too easily. Disturbingly easily.

Henrik was right, in the moment, there was a freedom, an innate knowledge of where to be and when to strike. He hated it.

He had lost his shield somewhere, but never felt its lack. Weapons wielded by warrior's hands held no threat. He was sure only an unseen arrow could fell him. But the arrows were not coming. On the edge of the battle, the land rose and he saw over the field. Arrows rained down on the center of the line, the tower behind the wall giving the Warpact archers unobstructed views.

It was obvious who their target was. The ground around Torstin was peppered with so many arrows, it looked like a field of wildflowers. Only one had struck the target, a single shaft rose from his shoulder, not that he seemed to notice, he struck with rage and power.

Now that Torstin was amongst the ranks of Warpact, the archers turned to the men milling about behind the front lines, finding easier targets.

From Egmond's vantage, the field held three distinct battles. In the center, Torstin, his great axe like a farmer's scythe, both clearing crops and watering others with sprays of blood. Nearer Egmond, Henrik fought like a fiend. Not the force of death that Torstin was, but a death dealer in his own right. Though the Warpact on this flank held their ground firmer. Egmond watched [??] take a sword to the gut, doubling over, clutching his stomach just like he did when he roared his deep belly laugh at a well told joke.

Farther down the field, on the opposite flank, the bulk of their force fought. And died. The numbers thinned, the ground exposing them to the archers brutally.

Egmond knew he could wade in with Henrik, overwhelm this flank and push through into the camp and collapse onto the Warpact. He knew it in his gut. He would survive. He would kill. He was made to shed

blood.

And he knew it would take too long. By the time they fought through this horde in these tight spaces, scores of his people would be dead.

Even as he watched, arrows continued to rain down on the left flank, waves of Norselike crashing against the rock of arrowheads, collapsing at the feet of their comrades behind, the next wave stumbling and faltering against the bodies. The Warpact were gaining ground over there, pushing out into the field, the superior numbers of the Norselike failing to overwhelm. They were losing. Slowly, but they were losing.

He turned and ran.

That must have been what it looked like to those around him. The young Leader, not a warrior, a coward. But this wasn't the way. This couldn't be the way.

He ran uphill, away from the battle, into the rocks and trees. He had an idea.

Covering ground quickly, like chasing games of youth, he leapt from rock to rock. And driven by something he didn't understand, something pushing him forward and up, stones twice his height he scaled in a few light steps, chasms thirty feet deep he crossed with no thought, running all the while.

Wrapping around the Warpact camp he found himself ten feet from the wall at the back, above it, on a rock outcrop.

He launched himself through the air, for a moment flying, soaring over the wall, below him, now behind him. Landing with a thud, rolling with the momentum, coming to his feet, moving immediately, fearing a blade or arrow. But no one was around him, he heard no cries of alarm.

In front of him lay the tower from which the archers rained death on his people. The posts, full tree trunks, splayed out, a solid foundation. In the center of the platform a single ladder came down to the ground. Easy to defend. Easy to watch.

He didn't need it.

His first jump took him up a post, halfway to a crossbeam. His second kicked off from the side of that great trunk and the beam was in his hands and he was hauling himself up.

It went like this the whole way up, smooth motions, climbing bare tree trunks like climbing naked stone.

At the top he leapt lightly over the banister, landing on the platform packed tightly at the front with archers, scores of arrows in the bundles on the ground, enough to slaughter most of the force attacking them, Egmond's people. Enough to kill everyone Egmond brought from his village, his peaceful village in the mountains.

He was among them in a flash, a viper striking and biting. He couldn't hesitate, arrows still flew. He couldn't think, their eyes were in his thoughts. Terrified eyes, wide eyes, eyes leaking the light of life, eyes

darkening in death, eyes that would never hold a loved one again, eyes that would never again reflect a sunrise.

He couldn't think about that.

And his vicious fury was having an effect.

Most faced his direction now, or the direction of dying screams among them, as the platform was large enough that he could hide and dash in the crowd, his sword slicing and slitting with freedom.

Most didn't have time to drop their bows and draw blades. Those that did still died to his.

The terror of his chaotic entrance broke them.

Some went for the ladder, others leapt over the railing, taking their chances scaling down the rough wood. Those that stayed died.

It was the thing that broke the battle. The noise from the tower drew the attention of the Warpact below, distracting them, and with no arrows falling in their favor the men of Egmond's land overwhelmed the Warpact. It wasn't immediate, but it was obvious now there was only one outcome.

Egmond watched, unable to move, collapsed against the railing, bathed in blood, alone at the top of the tower, surrounded by the dead.

The few Warpact left fought on, with a renewed desperation. None lay down their weapons. None ran. They fought, and they died.

Just like that, three Warpact fought hundreds of Norselike.

Just like that, a single warrior was left.

He threw himself, yelling, at the nearest enemy and was deflected.

He threw himself at another and was disarmed.

He threw himself at a third and was shoved to the ground.

With a cry as wild as a dying animal, he screamed "DAEMONS!" and was chopped down by Torstin's axe.

Hours out in the woods and nothing to show for it. She'd dragged Stranger out here again, hoping that if they went the other way up the ravine, they'd find something. Anything. But nothing. The only sign at all was the broken trees by the road. They were now searching through the woods on the northern side, there had to be a campsite or *anything*.

Stranger had followed her every step of the way. Leading sometimes actually. She proved adept at scaling the ravine again. They only brought rope this time because Stranger had asked for it. Stranger hauled Marta up the ravines faster than Marta could climb.

Marta stopped walking and sat down heavily. Stranger sat next to her, shrugged, made a face and sighed.

“Yeah, I don’t know where else to look either.”

The woods were deep here. The undergrowth thick. Giant trees, oak mostly, towered and loomed. The shadows were darker than she liked. Anyone could be hiding around the next tree. She shivered.

Stranger grabbed her elbow and pointed through the trees. “Point!” she said.

Marta confusedly looked where Stranger was pointing. Through a break in the treetops was a jagged peak with a cliff edge, a mile or so away through the woods.

“Yeah, we’re starting to get upland now, toward the mountains. Why?”

Stranger sighed, pointed at the cliff again, and put her hand over her eyes and looked around dramatically.

“Oh! Yes! Point!”

It took them another 20 minutes or so to get to the cliff. They spent more time going around unpassable brush than heading toward the cliff. They popped out of woods right at its base. The land around it moved upward gradually, almost unnoticeably.

“How are we going to get up there?” Marta wondered aloud.

Stranger, in her new take-charge way stepped up to the cliff wiping her hands on her pants. She squatted down and grabbed some loose gravel and dirt at the base and rubbed it on her hands. Then she stood up and hopped up onto a rock half as tall as her and started climbing.

“Wait wait wait!” Marta held up her hands. “Even if you can climb that, which is absurd, what are you a mountain goat? Even if you *can*, I *can’t* and we didn’t bring enough rope to haul me up.”

Stranger looked at her blankly. She sometimes forgot she couldn’t chatter at Stranger. She held up the rope. “Rope. Too short”, putting her palms close together. “I can’t climb”, pointing to herself and pretending to climb then falling backwards.

Stranger nodded, but looked up at the cliff...greedily?

“You’re weird”, said Marta. “Come on, let’s go this way, it’s a little uphill and the cliff curves away. Maybe we can find an easier way up. Or shorter at least.”

They followed the cliff face as closely as they could as the ground gradually rose. Eventually the cliff disappeared, abruptly cutting into a shorter hill. The climb up was steep, but Marta could stay on her feet most of the way, only occasionally using her hands to pull herself up. Once she slid down a little but Stranger grabbed her quickly and dug in her heels. After that they tied the rope around their waists, just in case.

Up and up they went, curling around in the woods, keeping the cliff on their left as much as they could without seeing it. Fewer trees dotted the forest now, the ground here rockier, signs of landslides in a few places. And then through the trees Marta saw the sea. It was very far off. She couldn't even tell the difference between the sea and the fog. One gray blob covering the horizon.

They broke through the treeline and the cliff edge was 10 feet of clear ground away. She could see for miles. To the left and far in the distance was Thornvaal. Below her was thick forest, broken up not too far off by the gully. It split the forest like a wound. If she squinted she was pretty sure she could see the giant stone at the end of the gully. Everywhere else she looked was green canopy. Except...

She and Stranger pointed at the same time. Off to the right, a small line of smoke poked up through the trees.

She was pretty confident she hadn't lost her bearings. They'd looked for as many landmarks and features as they could from the cliff, but it was a forest. There wasn't much to see.

Stranger had seemed confident at least. She headed in a direction doggedly, sometimes going through brush Marta would have preferred going around, her arms full of scratches and multiple tears in her coat the price. As they grew closer though, Stranger had slowed down. Looked more like a hare watching the skies. Eventually she stopped altogether. She had a deeply troubled look on her face, eyes watching Marta. She turned to face Marta, her lips pursing.

Stranger hunched her shoulders down, put her finger to her lips and mimed walking on tiptoe. Then she raised her hand above her eyes, which went comically wide, and she finished by pretending to run away. She looked at Marta expectantly.

"I get it. Careful." Marta nodded.

Not far off a horse whinnied. Stranger's eyes went wide.

Marta hunched down. Through the woods she could now catch muffled sounds of people and horses, but she couldn't see anything. She realized how little she could see actually, dark was coming.

They made their way towards the sounds, creeping along through the brush. The voices didn't carry far, almost like they were trying not to be heard.

Movement through the branches surprised her. Much closer than she meant to get. She crept sideways along a hedge, looking for a spot to peer through, and finding one.

About 20 feet away, was the edge of a camp. It must have been a big camp too judging by the number of horses in the clearing. Thirty, maybe forty or more? At amazing sight. Beautiful animals, inside a large rope fence at the edge of a camp that peppered the woods.

And all of the tents she saw looked like Warpact.

She looked back at Stranger, the whites of her eyes standing out in the fading light.

Worriedly, Marta pointed at the sky and put a hand over her eyes then at the horses. Stranger shook her head violently. Marta whispered “far” and made Stranger look through the gap, pointing to the nearest tent which was easily 300 feet away.

Marta whispered: “We will get lost in the woods, and we need to get back tonight.” She grabbed the terrified woman’s arm and pulled her along the hedge quietly toward a larger gap.

They slipped through it easily, now even farther from the nearest tent she could see. In the distance a fire lit up a small patch of woods and she could see Warpact walking around. Marta started to creep up on the horses and one of them snorted loudly causing her to jump.

Stranger shook her head angrily. She motioned for Marta to stay where she was, stood up and confidently walked toward the nearest horse. She walked right up to it, and stroked it’s nose! While petting it she grabbed the reins and walked it back toward Marta.

It was *huge* up close out of a pen. Why did she ever think these terrifying things were beautiful? Ok, actually it was quite beautiful. But *big*. On a good day she could probably jump over a donkey. She didn’t know if she could even jump up onto this monster’s back. Stranger held the reins and knelt next to the horse, patting her knee and tapping Marta’s shoe. The woman was so small it wasn’t much of a boost to be honest. But Marta put one hand on the horse and the other on Stranger’s head and clambered up. The horse snorted and stepped aside a bit but Stranger calmed it with strokes and shushes.

Handing Marta the reins, Stranger gestured for Marta to stay put and walked back toward the other horses. Marta didn’t move a muscle.

Stranger bent down and picked up a very large stick, or a small log, depending on how you looked at it. She walked back toward Marta and the horse and squatted down with the stick held in front of her. In one smooth motion she swiftly stood up, hurling the stick over her head back toward the horses and ran toward Marta. She leaped at the horse and hauled herself up behind Marta, much smoother than Marta had done with help.

The combination of the crashing stick, the running woman, and Marta’s scream of surprise as Stranger expertly wheeled their horse around, must have terrified the horses. They bolted away toward the camp, tearing through the rope fence and Stranger led their horse off into the woods back the direction they had come.

[todo: a chase scene away from the Warpact camp and alerting the city]

Camp that night was a somber celebration. A great victor had been won, in the face of difficult odds. They lived, but loved ones had died.

The bodies were gathered, too many by far, placed in the woods or amongst the stones, out in the open

fields, left to nature wherever those closest to them thought would, please the dead. Throughout the valley, voices echoed off the walls, reverberating in a chaotic din as some sang a sad dirge for fallen friends while others sang boisterous drinking songs or songs of joy and laughter. Honor given in death to each as they lived.

Egmund wandered, helping where he could, carrying bodies, piling rocks in mounds as a timeless reminder of where they lay, a remembrance nature wouldn't take away.

As dark of night grew, fires were lit, drink was consumed and songs continued. He found himself outside it all, apart as one who was not under their vow. He sense a distance, a few wary glances, those who saw him run, or heard about it, they understood, or thought they did, he wasn't a warrior. He was a Leader. The standard was different. He didn't think anyone had seen his assault on the tower. No, it was just the chaos of battle. Somewhere, some group had broken through and the tower fell. That was all they needed to think. In the coming days, the puzzle pieces would fall in place and questions may be asked, but for now, he was a coward and they had won the day.

Did he even want it the other way? Was it better to be a coward than praised for threshing lives with ease? Did Henrik or Torstin feel shredded inside? Did they see the eyes of the dead every time they closed theirs? Watching, waiting, judging his every action as he moved through the warmth of life while they lay cold and dead by his hand? If being a coward saved his soul, let them quietly say "he's just not a warrior".

He spent the night leaning against a tree trunk, listening to the music of the dead, wishing they would leave him alone.

The next day they travelled again, back the way they had come, crossing Judges' land, Torstin left scouts and messengers behind with orders to patrol the open land and coastline, to avoid the towers of Judges and to be damned if they listened to any orders from Derive to the contrary. They were orders taken with sour expectations, you did not ignore the ancestral intercessors of the Older Ones lightly, but you did not disobey Torstin lightly either.

The days and nights traveling merged together, he walked, he ate, he slept, he tried to live, but it took one conversation with Tormund to shred his peace. His friend only wanted to talk about the battle, what was it like? Were the barbarians as fierce as they sounded? Was Egmund afraid? How many did he kill?

Egmund could only grunt in response and eventually the questions and Tormund's enthusiasm faded. Egmund avoided him after that.

He couldn't be around Henrik or Torstin either, they reminded him of what he was capable of.

Three ddays in, he rose one morning, found a copse of trees where he could be alone, and he puked his guts out until it was time to march.

That was how it went until five days later, they crested a rise, the final hills before the long walk down to the plains around thornvaal, and over the treetops, smoke rose. Huge billowing black plumes, like clouds brought to earth and stained with ink. Very quickly, Egmund found himself riding a horse for only the

third time in his life, surrounded by other warriors, some obviously unfamiliar with riding, looking more terrified than they did facing enemy blades. Still others came behind on what pack animals could be ridden, comically undersized for these large warriors. The rest, the bulk of the force, ran behind. Where they found the energy after over a week of marching and fighting Egmond could only guess. The distance across the plains spread them out until only those on the horses, some fifty-strong, led by Torstin, came within sight of the city.

Egmond sighed with relief, the left edge, the northern most point smouldered more than burned, the plumes rising up from buildings burned to the ground, a few still burning but already in the charge of a bucket chain and citizens fighting to contain the flames.

As they rode up, Egmond caught sight of his aunt Laya shouting orders, covered in soot, looking haggard and worn. She turned at the sound of thundering hooves, her face held an unfamiliar fear. When she saw who rode up, relief filled her features.

Torstin, without dismounting, barked at her, "What happened here?"

"Warpact, out of the woods in the night," she pointed north. "Luckily we had warning thanks to a nosy girl. Otherwise, your city would be rubble and ash."

"You killed them?", asked Torstin.

"No, drove them off, about an hour ago. Back into the woods."

"And you didn't pursue?", growled Torstin.

"We didn't know their true number," snapped Laya, "and you left a scant fighting force. We saved your city instead."

"Fah!", Torstin wheeled his horse around shouting, "To me!" and took off north.

Egmond had no choice but to follow, waving to his aunt as he turned, her face frozen in disapproval and anger.

The horses flew north, across the plains, toward the wood, toward the unknown, driven by Torstin's rage.

To Egmond's left, he could just see the warriors on pack animals cresting a rise, angling away from the city toward the woods where Torstin aimed. Too far away still, once they entered the woods they would lose sight of each other.

Ahead of him, at the front, side by side, rode Torstin and Henrik, intent on finding Warpact, intent on killing them, two spirits of destruction, seeking prey.

Egmond saw eyes and felt sick.

They crashed into the woods, the undergrowth quickly growing thick, the force spread wide to cover more ground, looking for signs to follow or Warpact to kill.

They travelled for a while, with occasional cries of “Here!” or “This way!” as trails were found. The woods were thick now, the horses and pack animals walking beside their riders, spread out, picking their way through bushes and bramble, when off to Egmond’s right the sounds of fighting broke out.

With a bellowing, “To Me!” Torstin crashed out of the woods to Egmond’s left, Henrik and others from in front, all converging on the sounds.

Egmond jogged behind, doing his best to keep up, hesitant, not afraid, he wasn’t worried about himself, he was worried about what he would have to do.

Up ahead the trees thinned and a handful of Norselike fought a much larger group of Warpact. Too many. Torstin and Henrik joined the fight, the former swinging his axe in wide arcs, clearing Warpact and undergrowth alike, while Henrik was quickly surrounded.

Everywhere Egmond looked, they were outnumbered by Warpact, cut off in groups of one and two, fighting individual fights and losing badly.

A few Warpact fell, but not enough. Nowhere near enough.

He had no choice. Egmond dove into the crowd, slicing and cutting, his blade snicking a leg, his first crunching a face. He moved constantly, weaving in and sprinting in bursts, his only real thought, to get to Henrik and together clear the Warpact around any warriors they could reach.

Henrik saw his approach and angled his fight so that he could stand at Egmond’s back, protecting each other. They fought like that for a few minutes, the Warpact creating a wide circle with Egmond and Henrik at the center, a show piece at a country dance. And they did dance.

Warpact came at them in twos and threes, unable to get at their backs they tried to overwhelm with superior numbers, but these dancers were too deadly and Warpact fell.

Egmond kicked and punched and stabbed and sliced and chopped and dodged on unending rhythm of death taking over and he preferred it that way.

He tried not to think, tried not to see, he didn’t want to remember this tomorrow.

But that was not his face.

A Warpact warrior dove in, a clumsy swing that Egmond dodged easily and his arm came up and stabbed, piercing the warrior’s gut, and he made eye contact.

She was small. Her war garb hid it well, but the weight of her on his sword was that of a small bird.

She was young. No more than fifteen, she couldn’t be.

She could have been Tormund’s sister. His twin. Tormund didn’t have a sister but she had his nose. And his eyes. And as the song of her life left those eyes, Egmond’s arm drooped under the weight of death and she slid from his blade onto the forest floor.

He couldn't move. He was frozen. His muscles wouldn't respond. He couldn't take his gaze away from her lifeless eyes.

A Warpact warrior lunged at him with a spear, trying to take advantage of the unmoving man in front of him.

Egmund's body moved on its own, his limbs snapping crisply into deadly motion. He stepped sideways at the stab of the spear, snapping the shaft between his body and arm and jammed his sword into the man's jaw, upwards, piercing his skull from below.

The eyes stared into his, unblinking, both of them.

Another warrior dove at him with a spear. Egmund's blade was still in a man's skull so he dropped his sword and ducked the Warpact's swing.

The movement surprised his opponent, who stumbled past him.

And just like that, Henrik's back was exposed.

The Warpact spear punched upward, piercing Henrik who screamed and arched his back, the spearpoint bursting from his chest.

Egmund dove forward, grabbing the man and hurling him away, but too late. Another stepped in and sliced Henrik's throat.

Time slowed.

As his blood flowed down Henrik's shirt, the river meeting the spear-pierced pool, his eyes brightened, their sparkle giving the grimace on his face an unexpected life. It could have been a smile. A smile like the one he wore on feast days, roaring with laughter with a mug in his hand as he listened to tales told by firelight. A smile like the one he wore wrestling with Egmund and Bjorn, the older boy, nearly a man, tossing his chosen brothers into the long grass with ease. A smile like the one he wore when Egmund's mother put a wreath of cloudberry blossoms around his neck in celebration of him winning the yearly race, again, like the year before and the year before. A smile, the exact copy, of the giant grin he wore the moment after someone pried him in the face for winning the race, again, just like the year before and the year before.

And then the twinkle left his eye and the smile died and in that moment, that horrible, too late moment, the rest of their warriors caught up to them in the wood, a great number smashing through the trees and cutting down the Warpact and Egmund fell to his knees thinking about eyes.

Chapter 13

The days that followed were a blur.

He remembered working with others to carry Henrik to the cliffs by the castle. The sight of the sea always brought joy to Henrik.

He was aware of tired welcomes as they returned to Thornvaal.

He was aware of a tension between his aunt Laya and Torstin, over the defence of the city. But he didn't register much of it.

[todo: what else through Egmond's view after Henrik dies]

She found him on the balcony again. Sitting on the railing, feet dangling over the edge, looking through his feet at the crashing waves below.

"Egmond?", she asked hesitantly.

He didn't look up. "Yes?"

"Did you eat anything today? I didn't see you in the hall."

"Someone brought bread to my room."

"...but did you eat it?"

Sighing he spun around on the railing and hopped off onto the balcony. "What do you want Marta?"

"I wanted to check on you."

"I'm fine."

"I think we can both see you're not fine."

"I'm *fine*."

She watched him silently. His eyes challenged, daring her to poke the raw wound. She dared. "You're not fine. Henrik meant a lot to you, and I know you're not fine and if you *were* fine with him dying I would think less of you. He was like an older brother, I've seen you following him around doe-eyed since you were young enough to be spanked, and if you don't want to talk about it that's fine but I *know* you are not 'fine'!"

For a moment it looked like he was going to explode, then he slumped against the railing, sliding down until he sat on the floor and put his head in his hands.

"Egmond...I'm...I'm sorry that was too much." She sat down next to him and fiddled with her pants.

The waves crashed against the rocks, drowning out the sounds of the city, it felt like they were surrounded by ocean.

Egmond broke the silence. "He didn't need to die."

"I know", she leaned against him. "I wish the Warpact didn't exist. I wish they would just leave...or talk to us...or..."

“No. I mean that he shouldn’t have been there.” He picked up a pebble, spinning it in his fingers, as if it held the answers. “If we hadn’t taken most of the warriors to Judges. If we had people watching the whole coast. If we planned instead of rushing into the woods, if we *scouted*, there are so many decisions that could have gone better.” He threw the pebble. “But they didn’t.”

“I’m sorry Egmond.”

“It’s fi...ok it’s not fine”, he smiled at her and was suddenly a mess of wracking sobs. She reached out and held him and let him cry.

His sobs died down and she let go, leaning back against the railing.

He sniffled some, wiped his nose on his sleeve and said: “I’m sorry.”

“It’s *fine*”, she grinned at him. “We’re all going to miss him. He was so...alive.” What a horrible choice of words. “I mean he was vital, he had an energy that pulled you along, you know? Of course you know.”

“And now he doesn’t.”

“And now he doesn’t”, she nodded somberly.

A boot scuffed at the entrance to the balcony and they both looked up. Laya stood there, hands on her hips. “I thought I’d find you here. A messenger just arrived from Judges. Come on”, she waved for them to follow and walked out.

Egmond pulled himself to his feet. “Thanks Marta.” He put both hands out and she took them.

“For what?” she asked while he pulled her up.

“For the talk”, he smiled slightly.

“I’m good at talking”, his smile turned to a grin.

“And for checking on me.”

“I said you needed someone to keep an eye on you didn’t I?”

He nodded. “Come on, let’s go find out what else has gone wrong.”

They followed Laya through the halls, clearly heading to the council chambers. People rushed through the halls on errands, a flurry of activity, faces worried. News must have spread and it probably wasn’t good.

As they approached the council chambers, she could hear voices full of anger. They walked in to the sight of Wuirthing and Torstin face to face, squaring up, like two bulls.

Torstin’s finger was jabbing into Wuirthing’s chest. “You can’t know how many yet! I don’t trust the Judges scouts anyway! We already saw they don’t know their own land, it’s probably a single force that took a single city!”

“Don’t be a fool!” Wuirthing let the finger jab. “The man said he barely made it out alive and he reported on at least two towns. I will not be cut off from my people for your benefit!”

So quiet it was like a shout into the room, Laya said: “You puffed up morons. What is the news?”

Wuirthing calmly pushed Torstin’s finger away. “A messenger from Judges. They’ve been overrun.”

Egmund asked: “Overrun how?”

Torstin whipped around and slammed his hand on the table, sitting in a chair at the same time. “He *says* that not long after we left, dozens of ships landed at multiple points along their coast. And they attacked ‘every town and holding’, his words, killing everyone. He *says* he barely made it out alive, he even admits to stealing horses to get out.”

Wuirthing still stood there, drink in hand. “We have no reason not to believe him. And because of that, I am taking my warriors and going home. I’m going up through the mountain passes in fact, I’ll pass through your lands”, he looked pointedly at Egmund. “I would ask for Egmund’s permission to travel through his lands.”

All eyes turned to Egmund. “Of course.” He said it calmly, palms sweating.

Torstin stood up. He looked coldly at Egmund. “You would undermine me? Just like that?”

“Uncle”, Egmund hesitated, his heart racing at the unexpected question, “I’m not undermining you. We need their help.” He looked Torstin squarely in the eyes and his jaw set. “But I won’t stop a man defending his home. His people.”

“Defending his home...”, Torstin fumed. “If it wasn’t for me, *your king*, none of you would have homes. The bastards would have slaughtered everyone on this island.” He walked slowly toward Egmund, until he was standing uncomfortably close, his face filling Egmund’s vision. “Your parents died for this.”

Egmund felt something flare in him, the edges of his vision darked. Wuirthing saved him from a mistake. “So have countless of my warriors, and his warriors”, pointing at Egmund. “Our clans have bled for you. If it wasn’t *for us* you would have no home.” He slammed his cup onto the table. “*I* still fight to save this island from those monsters, and I’ll do it from the North. From my home.” He turned on his heel and walked out the door.

Egmund had unknowingly backed away from his uncle, whose eyes hadn’t left Egmund’s face during Wuirthing’s speech. Now he held Egmund’s gaze and said: “Get out.”

“Uncle...”

“GET OUT!”, Torstin swept the flagon of wine off of the table, it hit the wall and shattered.

Marta grabbed Egmund’s arm and pulled him toward the door. Laya said: “Let’s go boy.” and Egmund followed them out, never breaking eye contact with his uncle.

Chapter 14

A week passed. Scouts sent to Judges reported Warpact ships all along the coast, and thousands of warriors in the countryside. They hadn't been able to make it to any towns or seen any Norselike. The Warpact seemed to be treating the territory as something to defend.

A cloud of dust rose in the woods, following known paths, all the way to a rider on a horse moving at top speed toward Thornvaal. The rider broke from the paths to make better time, cutting through fields, and entered the city away from the main road. Cutting in and out of houses, knocking over people and stalls, no hesitation, a single-minded mission right up to the gates of the castle where he was finally stopped.

"Warriors in the woods! Alert the king!", this gained him entrance immediately.

Before too much panic could be raised, more riders came out of the woods, moving quickly, not in a state of panic though.

They waved Oronskar colors.

A contingent of Oronskar warriors and their Leaders, Hroldan and his wife, showed up to dinner that night. A few thousand of them had come out of the woods and on entering the city, went straight to their clan house, sending no messenger or word until they showed up at dinner time.

Egmund sat at the table on the dais when they walked in. Hroldan pushed through the doors loudly and stopped, basking in the attention. His wife moved past him, pulling him along behind. Three warriors accompanied them.

They walked right up to the dais and sat at the King's table. The Queen welcomed them with a smile and a word. "It is wonderful to see you Hroldan, Felona", nodding to each in turn. "We welcome you to our city", she looked at Torstin, "don't we husband?"

The king begrudgingly nodded.

Hroldan, through a mouthful of pork said: "Never let it be said Oronskar can't be trusted in a time of need." He raised his cup toward Torstin, a wicked grin on his face.

"Never let it be said", Torstin agreed.

"We are in need", Egmund spoke up. "Greatly. You have heard the reports from Judges? Any news of the North?"

Hroldan leaned across the table to pile potatoes on his plate. "We've heard. We had a messenger from Vyoss just before Wuirthing brought hundreds of warriors through my land. Said you gave them 'permission' young Egmund."

"I apologize Leader. I told Leader Vyoss that they could use the passes through Heilingsson land to get home. I never said I spoke for Oronskar."

“You had best remember that. I speak for Oronskar. No one else.”

His wife stared daggers at him. “*We*...speak for Oronskar.”

“Yes, yes of course”, her husband waved away her concerns with a chicken leg.

The Queen’s laugh sprinkled the table. “Husbands often forget such a fact don’t they?” Felona nodded.

Torstin interjected: “It’s good you’ve come. As Egmond says, we are in need. And that fool Wuirthing has put us in a tighter bind. If he’d worked with me, he’d be home by now, the short way. As it stands now, we are split.”

Hroldan said: “What problems can Oronskar warriors solve for you oh mighty king?”

Torstin let that go. “In a few days we travel to Judges and kill the bastards. It’s that simple. I have driven them off this land twice now. A third time is easy. They fight like cowards away from the sea.”

Egmond spoke up. “Uncle, I’ve been thinking. What if Oronskar warriors went to the north of Sillum lands? Skirt the mountain’s edges and come at the Warpact from an unexpected direction? Fight them on 2 fronts. They may already be fighting Vyoss in the North for all we know. They’ve shown us how hard it is to fight when stretched thin, so let’s do it to them.”

“No!”, Felona slammed her hand down on the table, her eyes shouting danger. Hroldan chuckled. “We will stay here. Or we will go with you. Oronskar fights beside *King* Torstin. Not *for*.”

Egmond was the first to speak into the silence.

“We all fight with each other”, he gestured around the room. “But we can’t all stay together. The Warpact are running us ragged going back and forth, always ahead of us. Oronskar warriors are the most fresh. They can get there faster and be fresher.”

“Tcchaaa”, she hissed. “Oronskar will not be a sacrifice”, locked in a stare with Torstin. “We will go to Judges and we will fight the Warpact. And we will do it by the side of our king.”

Torstin said through clenched teeth: “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

After dinner, walking through the castle, Egmond caught sight of his aunt Laya talking quietly with Felona, her husband nowhere around. When they saw Egmond, they walked down the corridor without a word to him.

Behind him his other aunt said: “I never know how to feel about that one.”

“Leader Oronskar?”

“Yes, her. Felona.”

“What do you mean?”

She took his arm in hers and walked him through the castle. “Your mother and her were great friends in their youth, did you know that?”

“No”, his parents had only ever talked about Oronskar in annoyance.

“It was a time when the clans were fighting less, and friendships were being made. Your father was close with Torstin, and would meet regularly there, halfway between Heilingsson and Sillum. And Felona and your mother were almost like sisters, or maybe cousins”, she smiled up at him. “Naturally...well, it isn’t a thing a wife dwells on, but at one point many people assumed Torstin and Felona would marry and Sillum and Oronskar would become one.”

“Wait, she is the hereditary Leader of Oronskar? The way Hroldan speaks...”

“I know I shouldn’t say this to another Leader...but to my nephew I will say...that man is a trial. Yes, Felona is the hereditary Leader. Hroldan was an advisor to her father. Long before her father died, something happened between her and Torstin, or maybe it was all of them? Those four were fast friends, and then one day...it stopped.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I was not privy to their friendship. I had my own.”

“You never asked my mother? Or the king?”

“Your mother never wanted to talk about it”, she pursed her lips at him, “and no, I’ve never asked my husband why he fell out of love with his childhood sweetheart.”

She continued: “I have heard, that when Felona’s father passed, the Oronskar council thought it wise to tie her to her father’s closest advisor. I suppose she didn’t disagree. I don’t know her well, but as you saw tonight, that woman is not known for going along quietly. Come, let’s talk of nicer things.”

She chattered at him as they walked through the castle, Egmond only vaguely paying attention.

Stranger and Marta walked out onto the balcony. It was a clear night, the moon bright enough to pierce the fog and light up the sea.

They surprised a dark haired woman standing near the edge. It was the Oronskar Leader, Hroldan’s wife. She stepped back. “Who are you?” she hissed at Stranger.

Stranger’s eyes had gone wide in alarm.

Marta looked back and forth between them. “This is Stranger. That’s what we call her.”

The woman looked Stranger up and down. “You call her Stranger? Do *you* know her? Who are you?” this last aimed at Marta.

This felt like dangerous territory. “My name is Marta. Leader?”

“Does she not speak?”

“I speak small”, Stranger said quietly.

“Where do you come from?”

Stranger shrugged, Marta knew she understood the question, she had asked it herself a few times.

Marta broke in again. “She doesn’t remember. Or actually she remembers but none of it makes sense when she tries to explain it.” A beat, then: “You are Leader Oronskar?”

“Yes”, she snapped. “What do you mean it doesn’t make sense?”

“She tries to explain, but she doesn’t speak our language. She barely knows many words so it’s hard to describe. I know she’s not from here, and that she’s my friend. Why do you want to know?”

The woman’s stare was ice. Which made Marta give it right back.

“I would like to get to know you both”, said the woman abruptly, her voice clipped. “Come, sit”, gesturing to the bench along the rampart.

“We probably shouldn’t take up your time Leader Oronskar—”, Marta started.

“You will call me Felona. Come. Sit. Please.” She sat herself and looked expectantly.

Marta motioned for Stranger to sit across from Felona and then sat down beside her.

Felona spoke first. “I have met many people from outside the fog. None like her.”

“In what way? I haven’t met anyone else from outside the fog. I’ve heard about them. Why is she different?”

Felona fiddled with the stonework. “What do you know of clan Oronskar child?”

“Not much. I know what people say. I don’t know if it’s true.”

“What do these people say of my clan?”

“Well...they say that Oronskar aren’t to be trusted.” The woman’s mouth pinched. “You did ask. They say that Oronskar worship the Older Ones. That you think you’re better than everyone else. That you would stab us in the back. That you steal goats.” She trailed off.

“They say much.”

Stranger’s concerned face was tracking back and forth between them.

“We do not worship the Older Ones. Not like that.” She adjusted her dress. “Do you know the words of the ritual when a new Leader is raised?”

Marta shook her head.

“When a new Leader is raised, we give of our own blood to the Stone.” Marta’s eyebrows raised. “The ritual says we do it so the Older Ones know we remember our place. Oronskar remembers it’s place. We do not worship the Older Ones, but neither have we abandoned them as so many clans do these days.”

“What does that have to do with Stranger?”

“As I say, I have met many people from outside the fog. Traders, travelers, merchants. They are just like us. They feel the same as us. I did not know they ‘felt’ the same, until I saw her. They walk the earth and the earth responds to them. They speak and I feel them as one like me. She”, pointing at Stranger, “is different.”

“Different how?”

“...I don’t know. This is why I would like to get to know you both.”

Chapter 15

He is angry.

His mother is in his face. Angry.

In silence he gestures wildly at her.

She slaps his arm away. She is angry.

He shoves her.

She stumbles backwards. Falls. Her head hits the Stone.

Her hand covers the spot. Her face is afraid. She pulls her hand away. She looks at the blood on her fingers.

Her eyes meet his. The fear is gone.

She pushes against the Stone with the bloody hand and screams at him.

She is lilac fury.

He sees only the blood on the Stone. He is hungry. He is rage.

He grabs her by the throat and slams her onto the Stone.

He slashes her throat.

Her blood flows and the Stone glows in his soul.

His heart sings.

Egmund woke to the sound of shouts. The light through the window was pink. Out in the hallway people were running back and forth in a flurry. He stopped a house servant. "What's going on?"

"Prisoner's escaped!", the servant kept moving.

Egmund ran for the council chambers. He found his uncle there receiving news. The messenger looked up when Egmund rushed in then continued.

"We are scouring the city, but no one saw them leave the castle, they're probably long gone now."

Torstin waved the man out.

Egmund asked: "What exactly happened?"

"The prisoners, those you brought from that camp, one of them escaped in the night. Killed the guard somehow."

"How did they kill the guard? Wait, one of them? What happened to the other?"

"Dead right beside the guard."

"So the guard probably killed him, while his friend killed the guard."

"Perhaps", Torstin tapped his finger on the table absently.

"Did they kill anyone else?"

The king shook his head.

Egmund wasn't sure what else to say. "I hope they find him before he causes more problems." He got up. His uncle's eyes didn't leave the table. He almost looked through it. "Let me know if you hear more", Egmund left.

He went looking for his aunt Laya, she would want to know, and maybe she would know what was wrong with the king.

He couldn't find her anywhere. He tried the training ground, the main hall, the kitchen, the stables. He looked everywhere, asked anyone he saw if they had seen her. No one had since dinner last night.

The last time she'd been seen, was talking to Felona.

But he didn't get a chance to wonder about that. Warpact ships were seen in the fog.

The castle felt empty. Wandering around the echoing halls, the air was cold, the crash of waves loud enough to bounce around the walls.

Egmund walked aimlessly. Raised voices caught his attention. Rounding a corner, he caught sight of Felona and the Queen exchanging sharp words. His aunt looked abnormally angry, her normally kind face reddened with her words.

Felona's hand gripped Tani's arm, which she dropped when Egmond came into view.

"What's going on here?"

Tani stepped toward Egmond, her arm going into his and pulling him close. Her face still held anger, but also a little fear.

"Leader Oronskar seems to be threatening me."

Felona's face flushed. "I am not threatening you!"

Tani snapped back, "Then what am I supposed to be wary of?", her eyes were wild and she stepped toward Felona again. "What do my sisters have to do with you?"

Egmond pulled her back, waiting for Felona to speak, but the woman was silent, her eyes now wide and her face red.

"What do you want to know about my mother and aunt?", he asked with less civility than he probably should have with another Leader.

Her eyes snapped to his. "Do you know where your aunt Laya is?", she asked.

"I would ask you the same. You have spoken to her more recently than I have.", he flashed back to Laya and this woman in an animated conversation in a similar hallway. "What did you speak of? Why did she disappear the night you had an argument?"

Felona's face grew a darker shade of red. "It was not an argument," she said in clipped tones.

"What did you speak of?", his anger was rising.

Her eyes went to the Queen's face. "I was warning her of a danger."

Tani asked: "What danger? Were you as crypted as this? Do *you* know why she disappeared? Where she went?"

Egmond was not used to seeing Tani this heated. Felona's eyes darted between their faces like a cornered animal. Finally she said hesitantly, "I...have had a vision."

Shockingly, the Queen spit. "Fah! You admit to witchcraft?"

"I admit to no such thing!", the fire returned to Felona's face. "We belong to the Older Ones and they to us!", she tapped herself on the chest. "What *I* do is respect and worship!"

"What vision have the demons given you then? What warnings do you bring me from the evil gods?"

That shocked Egmond. Nobody was that blatant in cursing the Older Ones. He subconsciously made a sign of warding.

Felona screeched, "I do *not* touch evil!" and now *she* spit.

The women squared up, hackles raised like she-bears defending cubs.

A chuckle from behind Egmond broke the standoff. Hroldan, with a wide grin, said “Should we take bets on a winner?”

A wordless scream of frustration broke out of Felona and she stalked off down the hallway, the opposite direction of her husband. He followed, chuckling. “Your majesty,” he said with a nod at the Queen as he passed them.

Dark clouds dominated the skyline, penetrating the fog wall from the outside world and imposing themselves on the nearby sea.

Still morning, but fishing vessels were returning early to port, as if running from an oncoming storm.

He watched from the small white beach at the base of the hill that held the castle, its yellow-stoned walls sprouting out of the grasses like a growth.

Gulls called above, careening and wheeling, catching the air off the hot white sand, diving into the depths, sometimes bringing up a squirming fish, soaring away to eviscerate its prize.

Watching them soar, free on the air, he was jealous. Jealous of their ignorance, their indifference, their freedom; he wanted to fly, to pierce the fog wall and leave this place of death and sadness.

But he wasn’t here to watch the birds and the sea. He had another purpose. The cliff loomed to his left, its sheer face like a gigantic wave cresting, the castle moments away from crashing into the depths below.

It never moved from the crest. The wave of land held. Below the castle, on the jagged rocks of the cliff, he knew a shrine sat. It was the best place he could think of for what he needed to do.

Felona said it was best in a place with a connection to her. To his mother. A strong connection.

Sighing, he turned from the waves. He left the beach behind, walked the path uphill a short distance to the rocks. The climb was easier alone, no one to haul up large rocks, the walk went by quickly.

The ledge had changes. Now, where they left flowers last time, was a small wooden stand, Laya’s flowers lay across it, along with others, fresher. Not fresh enough though. Not a clue to where she had gone when she disappeared.

The stand also had spent incense sticks in holes, their ashes blown in the wind, and amazingly, in the center of the stand was a statue of Yata.

He stared at it, wary. One of his aunts must have left it, and he was here to cross that barrier, to invoke the Older Ones, to some degree, but when your whole life you are taught to fear something, it was a hard feeling to ignore. Even with Yata. The Protector.

A warmth on his chest reminded him of his own efficacy. He pulled out the pendant and held it in his hand.

Considerably smaller than the statue, the pendant features were different. Where the statue was more tree than fox, and its ears more playful than alert, the biggest difference was the face. The teeth.

The statue smiled, warm and inviting. Offering rest and comfort.

The pendant leered. Teeth sharp and long, giving the impression of rows behind rows of spears. He expected a wicked split tongue to snap out at any moment, pulling him into the mouth to be ground and sliced, to be food for a god.

That mouth said it new what he would taste like, knew the pleasure his flesh would bring in devouring.

He tucked it back into his shirt. The statue would suffice for what he needed. He tried to ignore the weight of the pendant as he sat on the ground and pulled out a wrapped bundle. Another bunch of flowers, fresh and full, more incense, he replaced the burnt sticks in a small shrine, a small box with a burning coal, and something different this time. A small bottle of cloudberry wine, a special kind, with herbs and spices, brewed by the seer Marta had gone to. Marta's smile when he'd explained what he needed it for was obnoxiously large.

Still, he needed to do this. If this would work, and wasn't just superstitious nonsense.

Felona said he needed to believe. He wanted to believe. It was so hard without her, without his mother, and she was the only one he could admit that to.

Unstoppering the wine bottle, he sniffed it. Smelled like cloudberry wine. He almost wished he had some biscus cake to go with it.

He could picture her right beside him, cutting the cake, warm from the oven. She made it herself, prided herself on it. She never let cook make it, except at festivals when it became a fulltime job on its own.

He could feel her with him. Might as well do it now.

He took a big swig of the wine and lit the incense from his coal, then sat back against the cliff face, wary of being too close to the edge when the wine's effect took hold.

"May the Protector find you in the night. May she pull you from the dark and bind you, in safety, one with her. Keeping you. May you find peace," he thought he got it right. He didn't want to ask around. Now he added his own.

"And may you find me. And help me. Please."

He leaned over the incense, inhaling the smoke, thinking of her, letting it wash over him.

The storm clouds were closer now, their flashing centers and soft rounded edges seemed surreal compared to the flat fog wall which faded into the sea in the distance, gray and blue and green intermingled.

The storm clouds on the other hand, hwere like dark, angry balls of wool, bursting into pockets of flame, the edges shifting, growing, shrinking, steadily moving forward, coming for him.

A burst of lightning shot into the sea, the boom of thunder shaking his core, another quickly after, rattling his teeth. Maybe he should go back. It was closer than he'd realized, but it would be dangerous if the wine took effect as he was climbing down the cliff. He should have asked how long it's effects would take.

The clouds continued shifting, unfurling, rolling, like grasping arms on some mammoth sheep with no solid form, coming to engulf him, devour him. Shapes moved in the writhing mass, faces and bodies, coalescing and dissolving.

A gap opened, the shapes within losing vagueness, sharpening.

He saw mountains on fire, stones as large as cities crashing into the oceans, trees uprooting in anger, attacking the sky.

And he saw Warpact ships cresting waves in the clouds above, their warriors wreaking havoc in the villages, screams threatening to wake him.

Then, from the clouds, a lilac finger, the size of heaven, reached down and plucked him up into the sky. He floated there as the finger slashed an opening, darkness rending the gray clouds. Through the tear he saw...a city? ...forest? Of silver and black and lights and sound and...people. So many people. More people than he knew existed.

He saw a small woman among the people. It was Stranger, walking confidently, at home in the crowds of people. People like her and people not like her. She walked through this city, passing through an ocean of bodies, waves pushing and pulling, countless people of infinite variety with unknown sounds on the air.

He saw the woman stop at a stall selling food, reaching into the bag on her back, when a “CRACK” sounded and only the woman looked up at the sky. Right at Egmond.

And the lilac finger, reached down and plucked Stranger out of the people and up and up and up into nowhere and nowhere was where the lilac god dangled her and where she fought with Something that was Everything and was horrible and rending and the lilac finger held Stranger and Egmond up to Her face. He knew her face. Three times he knew her face. The face that meant his world.

And the face of Laya and Tani and his mother grinned, spears, rows of needles in a leer and the face grew into a fox and rabbit and tree and turned, an eternity passed as it turned to look at the Something that was Everything and the teeth bit at Everything and Everything slashed at the leaves and they fought with lashes and slashes and tears and hatred and he saw that She and Everything were part of each other and met at a point a miniscule point in nothing She just a piece of Everything and that piece flung Stranger into the point in nothing where She became Everything that was horrible and then the lilac face smiled at Egmond and Stranger plummeted out of the sky, smashing into Egmond and he woke up.

The harbor horns blew warning. Raider ships in the fog, in number, heading straight for the city.

Egmond found the King at the base of the eastern tower, hands gripping the stone parapet as he stared into the gray nothing beyond the harbor. Shapes moved within the fog. Dark hulls rising like whales from the depths and never falling.

The docks were down the hill from the castle, a path away from the city proper. Crowds ran away from

the water, and warriors ran to it.

“We have to wait until we know where they’ll land don’t we?” Egmond said.

The King’s knuckles whitened against the stone. “Every scrap of this kingdom, Egmond. We protect every scrap.” His voice tight, strained. His eyes held a light of anger that didn’t belong to the gray morning.

The ships headed straight for the docks.

Torstin leaped over the railing, rushing for the castle gates. Egmond took the stairs, trying his best to keep up. They gathered warriors along the way, the fog pressed close, muffling the sound of a crowd of killers pounding downhill in a wave.

At the docks they overturned carts and threw fishing nets, obstacles unlikely to tangle sea legs, but they were desperate. Then the shapes in the mist resolved into prow.

The King moved before Egmond could draw breath to shout orders, and then the ships crashed into the docks.

A Warpact axe swung toward the King’s head. The King caught the man’s wrist, lifted him bodily, and hurled him into another. A raider thrust with a spear; the King swept his great axe in a wide arc, taking the spearhead, the shaft, and the man holding it in a single stroke.

Egmond fought beside him, but it felt like trying to keep up with a landslide. The King grabbed a coil of rope, whipped it around a raider’s neck, snapped the rope and the neck. An arrow sprouted from the King’s shoulder. He didn’t flinch. Didn’t slow.

Between the two of them they cleared that section of dock in minutes. Bodies floated between the pilings and the ship floated away on blood-darkened water.

The King didn’t stop, he jumped onto the netting on the side of the ship, hauled himself onto the deck, ran across the other side and leaped.

For a moment he floated, then slammed down onto the deck of a ship on the next dock over. Egmond watched him run the width of the vessel crashing into the raiders from behind.

Egmond was left behind. He turned and ran back down the dock. He worked his way down the docks, section by section. The battle flowed around him, moments of desperate clarity punctuated by chaos. He found himself moving with the same grace he’d felt in the woods, time bending around each decision. A raider stumbled on the slick planks. Egmond’s blade found the gap in his mail. Another kicked a bucket at him before swinging his sword. Egmond stepped aside, stabbed him and let the man’s momentum carry him into the harbor.

No matter how he fought, he couldn’t catch up to Torstin. His uncle tore through crowds of Warpact, coming out the other side covered in blood, but living. Eventually fewer war cries echoed across the water. The ships that could still sail were pulling back into the gray, leaving their dead behind.

Chapter 16

Smoke and mist twirled together over the docks. One rolling in, the other going out. The battle had bled into the early hours of the morning, the time before pink touched the sky. Pipers and drummers moved with crowds through the city, a festival atmosphere after an unexpected new day dawning.

Marta returned from the wounded house in the city. They needed all the help available, the bodies of warriors outnumbered the beds, overflowing into nearby buildings hastily repurposed. She passed through the castle gates unchallenged, they knew her by name now.

She found Egmund on the balcony, right where she expected, his back to her, elbows locked, hands pushing the railing down toward the sea.

“Egmund? How are you doing?”

He wiped his face and turned to look at her.

“No Stranger this time?”

“She’s back in our room writing something. She writes in this small book every night. I think she’s recording the battle. We...we had a good view of it from the tower.”

He turned back to the sea and said nothing.

“We were watching you. I’m glad you’re ok”, she leaned up against the balcony next to him. He nodded, not looking away from the fog in the distance.

They watched the ocean together for a few minutes. The waves crashed below.

Marta broke the silence. “What’s it like?”

“What?”

Laya told me it would be. And she was right.

“Fighting. A battle. What’s it...like?”

He didn’t answer right away. “Chaos. It’s chaos.” His gaze softened. He continued. “Except...in some ways it isn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is”, he tossed a pebble into space, watching it fall. “Chaos I mean. It is chaos, but...when I’m in it...”, he turned and looked into her eyes, “it feels like time slows down. Or maybe like I’m moving faster than everyone else. I don’t know how to explain it Marta. When I’m fighting...it’s not hard for me. People try to kill me, and I just move out of the way. And it’s easy for me to kill them. I tried not killing people, but they keep trying to kill me, and if I don’t kill them, someone else will die.”

“Maybe...maybe that’s good though? Maybe you’d be...dead...too. If it wasn’t like that? We need great warriors, like the King. Without people like you...”

“I know. But you don’t get it. I’m not like the king. No one is I guess, he’s not like other men. He’s a great warrior. I’m not. I used to spar with Henrik and other warriors. Henrik could best me with an arm tied behind him. He used to disarm me for fun. This is...different. It’s unfair. It’s like I can just choose who lives and dies on a battlefield.” He looked back to the ocean. “I would happily choose who lives.”

“You’re wrong though”, he looked at her quizzically. “They say King Torstin is the greatest warrior our people have ever seen right?” He nodded. “Well, I could see you both yesterday. You were the same. Crowds of people tried to kill you. I thought you were going to die so many times, but then you’d be the only one who came out of the crowd. And then you’d dive into another one, and come out alive again. If that’s not a great warrior, I don’t know what is. Yesterday, I would have sworn you were a Champion.”

He scoffed. “Being touched by the Older Ones is the last thing I need. Besides, you don’t believe in Champions.”

“I don’t know Egmond”, she hesitated. “I’ve learned some...things.”

“I know, you and your seer”, he sneered, then pinched his brows.

“Egmond it’s...you don’t understand. I wouldn’t be surprised if the stories of the Older Ones are all based in truth. Maybe the Older Ones *have* touched you. Maybe it’s not a curse.”

“Nobody wants their attention Marta. I don’t.” He turned back to the waves.

“Why do you come up here so often?”

“I don’t know”, he gestured at the sea and fog. “It just...feels right. When I’m up here, the waves drown out noise, and the sea and the fog...it feels like I’m nowhere.”

“Like you’re in an island of fog and nothing else exists?”

His brow furrowed and he looked at her. “Yeah. Like that.”

She nodded. Then asked: “Any word from Laya yet?”

“No”, he straightened. “I’ve asked around, no one saw her after dinner. She was talking to Leader Oronskar. Felona.”

“She’s an odd one isn’t she?”

“I suppose? What do you mean?”

“I met her the other night, right here”, she tapped the balcony railing. “She was a little obsessed with Stranger.”

“Obsessed how?”

She thought for a moment. “She said Stranger was different than us. Than the outsiders. But she wouldn’t say what she meant, just that Stranger ‘felt’ different in some way. I tried to get more out of her but she just kept asking questions and I didn’t feel like answering them”

[todo: get to discussion about Laya]

The trip out to the hill in the woods went quicker now that she knew where to go. Now that she knew it was there, she didn’t know how she’d missed it before. Every time there was a break in the canopy, the hill was there.

The climb to the top wasn’t any easier once they got there. They walked around the hill for a while, hoping to find a clearer path, but the woods and hill wanted to make them work for it.

At the top, the view was as amazing as she remembered. The day was unusually clear, the sea visible for a long way. No sign of Warpact ships anywhere on the horizon.

No sign of anything but forest really. Nothing to do but wait and hope.

They didn’t talk much. Stranger didn’t talk much normally, but she *was* getting better with the language. She could usually make herself understood now, at least for basic needs. It had been her idea to camp here overnight. They found the Warpact last time from the smoke of a fire, maybe at full dark they would see more.

They made their own camp a little way down the hill, so their own fire was hidden, rather than acting like a beacon for the entire countryside. After dinner, they let it burn down to coals to be stoked later.

They took turns on watch, Marta volunteered for the first one, sleep had been elusive the last few nights anyway. Hours later, Stranger made her leave the cliff. She hadn’t even intended to wake Stranger for a while, no reason for her to lose sleep when Marta couldn’t, but Stranger insisted.

Barely any time later, Stranger came running down the hill in a panic, loudly-whispering “Hey! Hey! Look! Man!”

Marta raced her back to the cliff edge and looked where Stranger pointed. The moon was bright tonight, shadows outlining the landscape. There, walking down the strange gully where Egmond’s parents had been found, was a man. She thought it was a man, they were big. He disappeared through the trees but appeared again further down. He was heading implacably toward the end with the rock.

He disappeared in the treetops again and Marta moved down the cliff to the right, until she could see the rock. The man walked up to it, he was still too far away to make out his face.

Stranger tugged at her elbow. Marta waved her off without looking. She didn’t want to miss anything.

At the end of the gully he walked up to the rock and did...something...and the rock moved. It actually moved! It looked like it rolled a few feet sideways. Then the man disappeared!

Marta moved her head around, hoping he had moved behind a tree, but he was just gone. The rock had definitely moved, and the shadows around it were darker than they had been.

Stranger pulled at her elbow again, harder this time, so Marta looked at her. Stranger's odd bag was on the ground, open and she was pushing a small bundle at Marta. She put it into Marta's hands and looked excitedly at Marta.

The bundle was actually a small....thing?... Two small cylinders, connected in parallel. It felt strange, hard but soft. Almost like it was metal wrapped in leather, but it wasn't leather.

Marta looked up. "What is it?"

Stranger's grin hadn't left her face. "Look!"

"I'm looking. What is it though?"

Stranger sighed in frustration and grabbed whatever it was back from Marta. She pulled at the ends of the cylinders and a covering popped off. She did the same at the other end. Then she put the cylinders up to her eyes and said: "Look!"

She put it back in Marta's hands and pointed in the direction of the end of the gully.

Marta looked at the thing again. The covers Stranger had removed revealed circles of perfect glass. The cylinders were tubes with glass at each end. Shockingly clear glass. [todo: plant glass from traders?]

She looked at the end of the gully and put the tubes up to her eyes. It leapt at her! She dropped it, snatching at it, fumbling but catching hold before sending it over the edge of the cliff.

With wide eyes she looked at Stranger again, who was holding her hand to her chest. Stranger's grin broke out again. She said a strange word Marta didn't know and gestured back to the gully. Marta slowly raised it back to her eyes. She was ready this time when the gully leapt at her. It was like she had jumped the distance in an instant.

Through the tubes, Marta found the rock. The shadows *were* darker. In fact, the shadow looked like a hole. A hole concealed behind the giant rock. While she watched, suddenly the man squeezed out of the hole.

He was carrying a body over his shoulder.

She followed him as he effortlessly climbed up the side of the gully, carrying the body the whole time. At the top, he disappeared into the woods. She tried following him, but the tree cover blocked the moonlight too well.

With wide eyes, she turned back to Stranger. She didn't know what to say.

It would probably take them a while to get down to the gully, and then climbing down in would take longer, and they couldn't go inside, the man was definitely going to return. So they waited. And watched.

About an hour later, he came back out of the woods at a different spot, climbed down into the gully with ease, moved the rock back in place, impossibly, climbed back out and disappeared into the woods.

She was pretty sure she recognized him. And that wasn't good.

The next morning, in fully daylight, they went to the gully but saw no sign of anyone, and no sign of a body anywhere in the woods close by.

"Stop pulling", Egmond was being dragged along by Marta, "You haven't even told me exactly what we're doing."

"And I won't, not yet. It's important", Marta didn't slow down, and as always Stranger followed wherever Marta went, jogging a few steps every once in a while to keep up with longer legs.

Marta was nowhere to be found that morning at breakfast, and then a few hours later came running up to him in the hall, looking like she hadn't slept all night. She pestered and berated him until he agreed to go into the woods with her. She even made him ask to borrow the Queen's personal horses, making him swear not to tell anyone why. A pointless promise since he didn't know why either.

At the stables they had no trouble getting the horses saddled, the stablehand knew Marta by name for some reason. She even let Stranger command their horse, Marta towering over the smaller woman from the back. Egmond had trouble keeping up with her through the city, the woman rode like she'd been doing it all her life. Outside of the city, they gave the horses their reins, galloping down the trails deep into the woods. Eventually, they left the paths, then left horseback and finally tied off the horses and kept walking as the undergrowth grew thicker and thicker.

Finally the forest broke up and they stood on a ledge over a ravine. Marta stopped, looking down into the ravine for a minute. She had refused to answer any questions on the way so he waited. Marta took a deep breath.

"Right, so you know the night that Stranger and I found the Warpact camp in the woods and warned the city guard about them and that gave them enough warning to repel an attack? Well anyway, we were up there", she pointed to a cliff in the distance, visible just above the treeline. "From up there you can see all the way to the ocean and you can see some of the city and so much of the forest, and so last night we went and camped up there because we thought we might be able to find Laya or someone out in the woods when nobody should be in the woods out here right? And we did. See someone. Last night."

"...Ok"

"And this ravine we're standing on top of, it's the end of a gully that runs really far into the woods, and it's the gully they found your parents in."

"...And?"

"Well it's just that when we were up on the cliff last night, we saw someone in this gully, there, at that

rock”, she pointed to a large rock against the wall of the ravine, “and they moved the rock and there was a hole behind it, and then...they came out with a body and took it into the woods.”

He didn’t know what to say. “You saw someone move that rock, that huge rock, and pull a body out of the ground?”

“Not pull it out, they walked in and were gone for a little bit. I think there’s a cave or something.”

“Marta, one person couldn’t move that rock.”

“I know that...but he did. And Egmond”, she hesitated. He never saw Marta hesitate. “Egmond, I think it was the king. Your uncle. Carrying a body.”

He searched her face. Stranger stood over her shoulder nodding, her face a canvas of worry, though that wasn’t uncommon for Stranger. Marta didn’t lie, not to him.

“How do we get down?”

They climbed down the side of the ravine, Stranger moving at speed, making it look simple. Egmond found it easier than he’d expected, Marta was the only one to struggle.

Down at the bottom, the rock was even bigger than he expected.

Marta pointed at it. “Look, see? There, the dirt on the side, and look here, the indent in the ground.”

“How could one man move it though?”

“You said yourself Egmond...the King isn’t like other men.”

Egmond nodded. *I’m different too...*, he thought.

He moved around the rock, the indent in the ground was clear, perfectly shaped to a rounded part of the rock at the bottom. He crouched down, pressing up against a nook on the other side of the rock. He pushed. Hard. It didn’t move.

Marta said: “I’m gonna find a big stick, we’ll lever it open.”

Egmond let them run off, examining the rock and thinking.

Torstin isn’t like other men. I’m not like other men. He felt a push and pull inside. He suddenly felt revolted by this place, the shadows grew, animal sounds died down, his ears filled with a buzzing. An angry noise. He crouched down again and pushed. He strained, his feet slipping, and the anger rose in him and he pushed and pushed. His head felt like it was going to pop. He grunted, he groaned, he screamed and he pushed. And the rock moved. It shifted slightly and suddenly it’s weight tilted sideways, it settled into the indent in the ground, like a door rolled away.

There was a cave behind it.

Marta and Stranger had rushed back when he started screaming, Marta gasped when she saw the cave.

The entrance showed bare rock and dirt for ten feet, where the cave turned a corner into the darkness. Egmond walked inside, Stranger and Marta creeping along behind him. He pulled out his knife. At the corner, he quickly peeked, but it was complete darkness.

Marta slapped her forehead. "I didn't bring a lantern."

Egmond was about to suggest they go find dry wood, when Stranger let out a deep sigh. She pulled something out of her bag and held it in her hands. It was a black tube with a bulging end. He heard a "click" and the bulging end lit into a fire as bright as the noon sun. But it wasn't burning.

"What-", he started.

"Don't ask", interrupted Marta. "We'll talk about it later."

Stranger handed him the...lantern? There was no heat coming from it, but when he accidentally pointed the light at his eyes it almost blinded him. With spots in his eyes, he pointed the strange lantern down the tunnel. Just more cave. His anger hadn't subsided and he didn't understand it, but he knew he was going in. "Watch where walk, and stay quiet", he said.

The air cooled as they walked. The walls started as rough rock, but as the tunnel wound downward, the rock smoothed out. They walked for a few minutes, twisting and turning, but always going gradually down. And then they turned a corner and the smooth rock was carved.

At the end of the tunnel was an archway, clearly made by hand, vines and leaves in crisp detail, this was done by a master. Through the archway was a flat wall, the tunnel split, going in opposite directions. He walked through the arch.

It was a hallway. The right passage ended in a large open room, with stone benches on the wall, and a cistern in the center of the room on a pedestal with more detailed carvings. To the left was a statue. He jumped back, and Marta gasped again. The statue was Odeous. The snake man. The evil one.

His initial shock worn off, he noticed the top of a tree past Odeous. He leaned to the side, and yes, there behind the statue of Odeous was a statue of Yata. The tree with the fox tail, her rabbit ears poking into the treetop, and just past her he saw the whip of Soros, the punisher.

He took a step forward, almost expecting the statues to move. Marta grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "You can't..."

"I'm not stopping here Marta." After a moment she nodded.

They were all here. All the Older Ones, statues in a line. Odeous, Soros, Yata, Loson, Ayuna, Liya, all the rest. Some he didn't even know. Their statues were connected at the base by a sinuous line of stone, elevated out of the ground. In places it rose up past the base of the statue, intertwining with the Older One itself, flowing up and around the statue, like smoke.

Down the hallway they went, eyes darting to the statues, wary. At the end was another arch. Through the arch was another large open space, and at the end of the space was an altar, with a Stone on top.

Laya was on the Stone.

He abandoned care and ran to the altar. Marta squealed behind him but he didn't wait. He leapt up onto the altar before he noticed the blood.

The Stone was covered in blood. Blood that had clearly flowed out of Laya. He collapsed.

And then he remembered this place. He had dreamed of this place. His father lay right there, he could see the blood stain, and his mother had died on this Stone.

"I wish you hadn't come here", Torstin said from behind him.

Egmund whipped around. His uncle stood in the doorway, carrying a torch. He calmly set the torch into a sconce on the wall. "Tani mentioned you wanted to go for a ride in the woods. And she mentioned your nosy friend was with you, and that your friend was being...odd. More than usual. I wish you hadn't come here."

"Uncle...", Egmund had no words. "What...did..."

"You've never seemed to understand Egmund", he walked forward slowly. Marta and Stranger backed away, but Egmund stood his ground. "The Warpact almost took everything. From both of us. From *all* of us. The price was worth it. Worth saving our people, and our land."

Even with Stranger's lantern shining on him, the King's face was dark and shifting shadows.

"You...killed them? You killed them all?"

"I HAD TO! I PAID THE PRICE FOR WHAT I AM!", his bellow echoed in the space, repeating the admission.

Egmund's bubbling rage exploded. He dropped the lantern and ran screaming at his uncle. Time slowed. Egmund moved like a reed in wind, curling under Torstin's axe. He stabbed with his knife, catching the King in the side. It felt like stabbing stone.

They weaved in and out of the pools of light. The torch dancing, the lantern steady. Time crawled for Egmund, but the King was still fast. So fast. The axe bit Egmund once, shocking him. Torstin kicked at him, causing him to stumble. And then the axe fell on his arm, severing it at the elbow.

His world rocked and he fell. Lying in the dirt he stared in shock at the king, who raised the axe above his head to finish it. Suddenly, he was pelted by stones and pebbles. Marta and Stranger stood at the edge of the light, hurling stones.

The King ran at them and they dodged into the darkness. Egmund felt time slow further as the King roared into the darkness. Egmund hauled himself up, blackness pulling at the edges of his vision. He took his knife in his left hand and whipped it at the King's back.

It hit the king in the back of the neck, just above his shoulders, and stuck.

The King whirled around, his rage gone, his face nothing.

A BOOM roared out of the darkness. A hole appeared in the King's head, blood flowering from it, then flowing down between his eyes. The king collapsed, and Egmond faded into blackness.